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BUFFALO BILL'S TANGLED TRAIL



OR

GENTLEMAN JACK BY COL PRENTISS INGRAHAM.

WERE BUFFALO BILL AND SURGEON POWELL GOING TO THEIR DEATH DOWN THAT TORRENT?

BUFFALO BILL'S TANGLED TRAIL;

OR,

GENTLEMAN JACK,

THE MAN OF MANY MASKS.

A Romance of Tangled Trails followed by Buffalo Bill; and his Buckskin Heroes Surgeon Frank Powell, Wild Bill, Texas Jack, Captain Jack Crawford, Buckskin Sam, Colorado Carl and a Mysterious Unknown.

BY COLONEL PRENTISS INGRAHAM.

CHAPTER I.

BUFFALO BILL'S DEMAND.

A MORE perfect specimen of physical and handsome manhood, and superb equine beauty one would not care to behold than in a horse and rider following a well-known trail across a Texan prairie, their destination being a distant motte, in which was visible the comfortable home of some well-to-do ranchero.

The horse was going along at an easy canter, the reins hanging loose upon his neck, and his head turned from side to side, as he viewed the spreading prairie.

The animal was long-bodied, gaunt as a greyhound, with slender limbs and every indication of speed and endurance above the average, while he was as black as jet, and seemed proud of his elegant trappings of a Mexican saddle and bridle heavily studded with silver.

The rider was dressed in a pair of white corduroy pants stuck in cavalry boots, and a blue flannel jacket was trimmed with gold buttons, while a black scarf was knotted sailor-fashion under the broad collar of his white silk shirt.

He wore a gray sombrero, embroidered in silver, and pinned up with a Texas star, while his hair and beard were worn long, and were of dark brown hue.

His eyes were large, expressive, and a woman might envy him such orbs of vision, though there was a look in them as if they were gazing back into a past full of saddest memories.

A breech-loading rifle hung at his saddle-horn, and a pair of revolvers and long knife were in his embroidered belt, while a lasso, another dangerous weapon in skillful hands, swung from his saddle in a coil.

Gauntlet gloves covered hands that appeared shapely, and his handsomely-booted feet were remarkably small, and his spurs were of gold, being spread-eagle wings, the rowel being in the back.

As I have said, horse and rider were a picture hard to match.

As the horseman neared the ranch, a form swinging lazily in a hammock stretched upon the front piazza of the large and very comfortable frontier home, arose, and, glancing out over the prairie, descried his approach, and hastily smoothed her wrinkled dress, for it was a woman—a woman of rare beauty of countenance and form, whose face revealed a noble nature and pure heart.

Scarcely twenty, yet she had the repose of manner of a woman of the world.

"He is coming sooner than he said, but I am very glad," she muttered, aloud, and she glanced again at the pretty dress she wore and passed her hands over her red-bronze hair which fell in ringlets about her shoulders, for she did not wear it long.

The house about her, within and without, wore an inviting look, one of genial hospitality, and certainly far more comfortable than one would expect to find there on the far frontier of Texas.

The horseman raised his sombrero as he drew near, dismounted and allowed his horse to go off toward the stables, like one who felt that he was a welcome visitor, and ascending the piazza greeted the fair mistress of Ranch Retreat as though he held a claim upon her.

"I am so glad you have come, Mortimer, though I did not expect you until Sunday," she said, in a low, musical voice.

"Nor did I expect to come so soon, Jessie; but I have received a letter of importance which I wish to talk to you about."

"How strange, for father has a letter he wished to talk with you about, Mortimer."

"Indeed? Then shall I see him first, Jessie?"

"Oh no, for father is off on the ranch somewhere, and will not return until tea-time. Then I am curious to know all about your letter, and who it is from."

"It is from an old friend of yours."

"Of mine?"

"Yes; a man whom you admire greatly."

"I am certainly at a loss to know who it is."

"Well, it is hardly fair to excite a woman's curiosity and then not gratify it, so I will tell you that the letter is from the great king of scouts."

"Ah! Buffalo Bill!"

"Yes."

"You were not expecting a letter from him, Mortimer, and if I recall aright, you gave him your address a year ago to write you, only if he should need your services?"

"Yes, Jessie."

"And he needs you now?"

"He does."

"Oh, Mortimer! must you go back into that fearful life in the past which I had hoped was forever consigned to oblivion?" and the tears came into the beautiful eyes of Jessie Noland, as she gazed into the face of the Texan and laid her hand impressively upon his arm.

"It is in the past, Jessie—buried, yes, but I can never forget it," was the sad reply.

"And the letter, Mortimer?"

"You remember that when we left the scene of the last tragedies in our lives, Jessie, I said to the scout:

"Buffalo Bill, I am still unknown to you, except as to what I have told you of myself. My life of a border detective I hope is over; but, I owe much to you, and should you, any day in the future, need my services, I will come to you, but only if the call is so urgent as to make it a demand."

"And he has made the demand?"

"Yes; and more—that gallant fellow, Surgeon Frank Powell, adds a request also to Buffalo Bill's demand for me to come."

"It is so urgent then?"

"Yes, Jessie, as the letter of Buffalo Bill will reveal to you."

"And you have decided to resurrect the past, Mortimer, to reopen the wounds in your heart—the cruel, bitter wounds—by returning to the scenes where you suffered so deeply in the past?"

"I have determined to leave it to you, Jessie, to decide for me what I am to do."

"Oh, Mortimer!"

"You shall hear all, know all, and if you bid me not go, then Buffalo Bill's demand shall remain unheeded. If you bid me go, then I shall go and do my duty be the end what it may."

"I shall decide against the demand, Mortimer."

"Wait and hear the letter before you say what you will do, Jessie," was the low response that was almost a reproof.

CHAPTER II.

THE LETTER.

SEATING himself upon a rustic bench, while Jessie sat near him, Mortimer Bainbridge took from his jacket pocket an official-looking envelope which had been registered to the post where he got his mail.

"It is a long letter, as you see, Jessie, but the scout has been very explicit, so that I may fully understand the situation and the importance of the demand he makes upon me."

"I will be an attentive listener, Mortimer, but the demand must be a strong one, indeed, for me to give my consent to your going," was the answer.

"The letter is written at Fort Grand, in Colorado, Jessie, and was mailed just one month ago," and then Mortimer Bainbridge read as follows:

"MY DEAR MR. BAINBRIDGE:—

"I fear when you discover the name of Buffalo Bill signed to this letter, it may recall bitter memories to you, and which you have hoped to forget, but I take advantage of your great kindness in giving me your address, as I am sure that you are the only one I can look to now for aid in solving a mystery which has set me and my scouts at defiance, and I have also had the counsel and aid of Surgeon Frank Powell, who likewise is at a loss to discover what we would know."

"I recall you so pleasantly, as Bantbox Bill, the Bravo in Broadcloth, who saved Wild Bill and myself from death on our way to Hallelujah City, and afterward as a mystery which it was impossible for us to solve, that I can but remember you as a man who accomplished more than wonders—who was a miner, yet never mined; a terror, yet ever just in his vengeance; a Danite chief, though not a Mormon; a commander of the road-agent band known as the Toll-Takers of the Trails, though not yourself an outlaw; a magnificent Unknown, who solved all mysteries in your own peculiar way; a hunted man yet a border detective who had no peer."

"I say I recall all this regarding you, and how, not knowing you I trusted you wholly, and saw you in the end accomplish that which I could not do, aided as I was by the bravest of men and with a whole garrison of soldiers at my call when needed."

"I refer to this to announce that I now need you to help me in just such a position as before."

"Then you were upon the trail for your own personal revenge, and hunting down one most dear to you, yet who had wronged you most cruelly."

"Now it is a case where there has been another great wrong done, for the beautiful girl whom you aided us to rescue from the Toll-Takers is again a prisoner, having been kidnapped one afternoon near the fort some months ago, in company with a lady guest who had been residing here a few weeks."

"I refer to Miss Heloise Hembold, the daughter of Major Hembold, then of Fort L—, now of Fort Grand, where I am, at this writing, stationed. Miss Heloise's companion, when captured, was Miss Belle Braddock."

"The plot to kidnap Miss Heloise was a clever one, and it was in every way as successful as her previous abduction, when you had a hand in her rescue."

"You will recall that the kidnapper then was a

young Mexican by the name of Monte Miranda, once an officer of Lanceros in the army of Mexico, but whose wild life and crimes had caused him to fly the country, to afterward turn up as lieutenant of the Toll-Takers."

"He had a deep motive in the seizure of Miss Heloise, which would have been successful but for your interposition."

"When he fell into our power, deceived by him, we gave him his freedom upon conditions which he never kept, but made his escape, and though a paper was received by Major Hembold giving an account of his return to Mexico and death there, I do not believe in his demise, and regard him as the leader in the second disappearance of Miss Heloise."

"That man, Monte Miranda, was a Danite, and so he may have taken his captive to Salt Lake City, and have her in hiding there."

"You are a Danite, as far as knowing the secrets of the League is concerned, and hence, are the only person who can aid us in that direction of rescuing her from the power of the Saints."

"Then, too, many of the old band of Toll-Takers are again leagued under a new chief, and have played havoc upon the Overland; and as it was never known by them what became of you, though reported killed, knowing your nerve and versatility, both Surgeon Powell and myself have thought you might dare to go to the outlaw band and reclaim your title of captain, thus discovering if Miss Heloise is a captive there, and also if Monte Miranda is the chief of these resuscitated road-agents, who are now all so skillfully masked and disguised that we could not recognize him in the several brushes my scouts have had with them."

"Such is the situation, my dear Mr. Bainbridge, and at last, having come to the end of my trail, I call upon you to help me, and in doing so to rescue those unfortunate girls from the power of the man who, I feel sure, is Monte Miranda, the Mexican."

"The poor father of Miss Heloise is almost broken-hearted at her capture, and I fear, unless she is found, will soon become a wreck of the noble man he once was: but as no one at the fort knows where to reach Miss Braddock's friends, they know nothing of her capture, and she is a stranger to all here."

"I have done all that my skill as a scout could suggest, and I have had the aid of Surgeon Frank Powell and my own Buckskin League, with Captain Alf Taylor of the Fifth Cavalry and his boys in blue as strong allies."

"But our plans, plots and counterplots—our ambushing Toll-Takers, and trailing, have all been without avail, for not the slightest clew can be found to the missing girl."

"As you said that I must not ask your services unless the cause was important enough to make a demand, I now make that demand for your aid, pleading with you to help me."

"You shall have as allies, besides myself, Surgeon Powell, Wild Bill, Texas Jack, Captain Jack Crawford, and a dozen other noted scouts, with the backing of Captain Taylor's troop of cavalry, and we will obey your commands to the letter, so do not fail us, I beg of you."

"Expecting an immediate reply, I remain as ever,

Your Pard of the Plains,

"W. F. CODY,

"Buffalo Bill."

Then followed in another hand:

"MY DEAR MR. BAINBRIDGE:—

"Allow me to urge upon you to come and rescue the poor girls now in the hands, as I believe, of that Mexican Danite, Monte Miranda."

"I believe that you alone can save them, and I appeal to you, as one in whom their lives and happiness rest, not to refuse our pleading for your aid in their behalf."

"Knowing you as I have had reason to, I have faith that you will come, so I beg you to answer by wire, to be mailed from telegraph station nearest to Fort Grand."

Ever sincerely,

"FRANK POWELL,

"Surgeon U. S. A."

"You have heard the letter, Jessie?"

"Yes, Mortimer."

"Can I refuse the appeal?"

"No!"

CHAPTER III.

TRACKED BY A WOMAN.

THE sun was just setting beyond the prairie horizon, when Colonel Noland rode up to his door and dismounting, let his horse go alone to the stables.

His hair and beard were gray, and he had a military step and air, as he advanced and greeted the visitor with a pleasant word and grasp of the hand.

His manner toward the younger man was almost reverential, and that he admired him greatly was evident.

"My dear Bainbridge, I am glad to see you, and was hoping for your coming as I have a letter to show you," said Colonel Noland, and the three went into the house to supper, which a negress had prepared for them, and a tempting meal it was, as Dinah was a cook who acknowledged no superior in the culinary art.

After supper the colonel took a letter from his desk, remarking:

"This is from a detective who was once a soldier in my command and who twice owes his life to me—once when I saved him from drowning in the Rio Grande, and again from the Indians who had bound him to the ground to torture him to death."

"He was a sergeant, and a good one; but, tiring of army life he went to New York and became a detective, and where I got him to do some work for me, upon a certain occasion."

"Now he writes me a letter of warning, which, to fully understand, I will again refer to the fact that a woman who was incensed by my

casting her off, after having made her my wife, has been a Nemesis upon my track ever since.

"She was the twin sister of my wife, who consented to runaway with me and get married, as her parents did not wish her to wed a young soldier, whom they deemed to be a poor man, when she could win a millionaire.

"This woman discovered our secret, drugged her sister, and fled with me and became my wife, and the cheat was not discovered by me until too late, so perfect was the resemblance between the two in face and form, though their hearts were as different as daylight and darkness.

"I secured a divorce at once, and from that moment she has hated me with the undying hatred of an Indian.

"I married her sister, and our one son died in childhood. Then some financial investments of mine went wrong, and later, my wife passed away, and that female Cain was at the bottom of all my woes.

"I look upon her as a murderess, and fearing for Jessie, I took her from the brilliant future opening to her in metropolitan society and came here to the Texas frontier to hide and save my loved child.

"We have been content here, as you know, happy since you restored Jessie to me after her strange adventure of falling into a trap the same as had been set for me and into which I had fallen.

"But now comes this letter from Kenton Cassidy, the detective, which again darkens our lives with a foreboding of evil.

"Read it aloud, please, Bainbridge."

The young Texan took the letter, saw that it was headed from a New York City detective agency, and then read aloud, as follows:

"MY RESPECTED COLONEL:—

"I am able to give you a warning, though it may cause you pain and inconvenience.

"Still, for my dear old commander and friend in the past, I deem it my duty to betray one who is a stranger to me, but your foe.

"To explain: There came into my office one week ago a woman of striking appearance and whose age might be thirty, perhaps forty-five, for it was hard to tell.

"She was very beautiful, except for an ugly look in her eyes.

"Elegantly dressed, she was also supplied lavishly with money, and wore a miniature pin set with diamonds.

"The miniature was strangely like you as I knew you twelve years ago when a captain, yet seemed to have been taken years before that.

"It was of an officer in uniform.

"The woman is a blonde, with blue eyes, very long lashes, teeth that are faultless, and a perfect form above the medium height.

"You may recognize her from this description should she be sailing under false colors and have given me an *alias* instead of her name.

"The name she gave was *Mrs. Marie Knowles*.

"She came, she said, to have me discover for her the whereabouts of your daughter.

"She told me that she was an old friend of the family, had been in Europe for some years, and since your resignation from the army she had lost all trace of you; but that Miss Jessie was in New York she believed, and she would pay liberally to find her or you.

"I promised to do my best, and when she departed one of my men told me that I seemed to have forgotten when I once did some work for you there was a woman in the case.

"This man was the one I sent to you for the work, and he said that my beautiful visitor was the very woman, and that she was the bitterest foe of your daughter and yourself.

"So I decided to give her no information and to discover her intentions when next she called.

"She returned again in a few days, seemed disappointed that I could give her no clue, and placing a thousand dollars before me told me that it was mine if I discovered you or your daughter for her.

"I bade her return in ten days, and when she left I put Black, the man who had recognized her, upon her track.

"He discovered that she was stopping at a fashionable hotel, had plenty of money, seemed to have no friends, and had also visited three other detective agencies for the purpose of finding you.

"This was enough for me, so I sent for her, after getting up some fictitious papers, told her I had discovered you were living in Germany, and that your letters went to Frankfurt-a-Main.

"She smiled and said:

"Your information is all wrong, sir, for I have found out, through another source, and which is reliable as I can vouch for, that Colonel Noland is a ranchero on the Texas frontier, and his daughter is with him, so I shall go there to visit them next month."

"After she had departed, I had her shadowed, and discovered that she does intend to leave for Texas within a month, as soon as some one joins her for whom she is waiting.

"Thus I write you, my dear colonel, for the woman means mischief, I am sure.

"You have but to command me if I can serve you, and I will report to you when the woman leaves.

"With sincere respect,

"Your old comrade in arms,

"KENTON CASSIDY,

"Chief of Shadows' League."

CHAPTER IV.

A TRIO OF TEXANS.

WHEN Mortimer Bainbridge had read the letter from the detective to Colonel Noland, he said at once:

"I can see but one plan, colonel, to circumvent this woman."

"And that plan is, my dear Bainbridge—"

"If it were a man you had to fear, the question would be easily settled; but it is a woman, and one whom you have cause to fear, and whom you cannot plot against.

"Now I shall go to the Northwest, in obedience to the demand of Buffalo Bill, and I will be detained there for a long while, without doubt, so would ask you to close up your ranch here, and move over to my home of Overlook Ranch.

"Pardon me if I remind you, and Miss Jessie, that she has promised to become my wife at the close of the year, and you have said that you were content to give up the care of your place when your daughter married.

"Now, my plan is for you and Miss Jessie to go to Overlook Ranch, of which this woman-tracker knows nothing, and when she reaches Retreat Ranch she will discover that you have gone, and it will be no easy task for her to find you, as naturally she will suppose you got warning of her coming, and have left Texas.

"I will place on her track one to watch her, and who will see that no harm befalls Miss Jessie through her. At Overlook you will be as comfortable as here, while you will certainly be in less danger from the Indians and the Mexican raiders.

"You will go, will you not?"

Both the colonel and Jessie gave a ready acquiescence, and the next morning early, Bainbridge set off for his return to his own home, which was situated upon a hill overlooking the river, and as well fortified with stockade walls and defenses as a fort.

Arriving at this home he gave orders to have the place put in readiness for the coming of his guests, and a courier was dispatched to the home of Major Sam S. Hall, the Texan Ranger, and better known as Buckskin Sam, bearing the following note from Mortimer Bainbridge.

"OVERLOOK RANCH.

"Monday.

"FRIEND SAM:—

"I have a long and perilous trail to take, and I need you as an ally, along with my chief cowboy, Colorado Carl, who goes with me.

"Ride your best horse, and I will give you a second one, and bring your unerring weapons.

"Come prepared for a trail that may last months, perhaps a year, and understand that you draw liberal pay from the moment you receive this letter.

"My black pards, Lucas and Rabbit, will accompany us.

"Yours,

"BAINBRIDGE."

Three days after the sending of this note, Bainbridge and his cowboy chief, as Colorado Carl was called, were seated upon the spacious piazza of Overlook Ranch, when Buckskin Sam was descried coming up the canyon.

Colorado Carl was a man of striking presence, with athletic form, long golden beard, and hair. His attire was of buckskin, beaded and embroidered with porcupine-quills, while his fringed leggings were stuck into top-boots, and his head sheltered by a dove-colored sombrero looped up with a gold star.

"Sam has not disappointed you, chief," said Colorado Carl, as he saw the Texan Ranger approaching.

"I knew that he would not, for Sam Hall is as true as steel to friend or pard," responded Bainbridge.

The noted Texan Ranger now rode up and dismounted, while a tall and powerfully-framed negro led his horse away to the stables.

Buckskin Sam was a wiry-framed man, under the medium height, but with every indication of activity and strength.

His movements were quick, nervous, and his muscles were as if of finely-tempered steel.

His hands and feet were remarkably small, and his dress was a combination of the borderman and Mexican, for he wore boots, buckskin leggings and a velvet jacket embroidered with silver bullion, as was also his black sombrero, while a silver star over a pair of miniature revolvers indicated his claim to being a Ranger.

His jet-black hair was worn long, and he wore an imperial and mustache.

Full of resolution was his sharply-cut face, while in his small, intensely black eyes was a look of utter fearlessness.

"Well, Sam, you lost no time in obeying my demand upon you," said Mortimer Bainbridge, grasping his hand.

"I did not have to read your letter twice, ranchero, to see that I was wanted, and wanted badly, so I came," was the answer.

"I knew that you would do so, Hall, and I know you will be a tower of strength to me on this trail."

"Where does it lead?" asked Hall, as, after shaking hands with Colorado Carl, he threw himself into a chair.

"It will be hard to tell, Sam; but the truth is that Monte Miranda, who escaped when the Toll-Takers of the Trails were wiped out, has gotten another band together; and more—he has kidnapped Miss Hembold, the daughter of Major Hembold, of Fort Grand.

"Try as he can, Buffalo Bill and his men cannot track the fellow to his lair nor find the missing girl, and so he has called upon me to help him out."

"That means that the girl will be found and Monte Miranda run to earth."

"You are kind to say so, Sam, but, with your aid, and that of our pard, Colorado Carl here, I hope to do as you say, of course also aided by Buffalo Bill and his Boys in Buckskin.

"I have already decided upon a plan which I deem best to follow, especially as Cody fears that Miranda has taken the young lady to Salt Lake, for, as you know, he is a Mormon Danite.

"This plan I will make known to you as we go on our way."

"We three?"

"Yes; and Lucas and Rabbit, who, you know, are two colored men whom we can depend upon under any and all circumstances."

"You bet we can, ranchero, for I have seen them tried in several scrapes we have had with Comanche, Apache and Mexican raiders, and never found wanting."

"Well, we will start to-morrow afternoon, after the arrival of Colonel Noland and his daughter, who are to occupy Overlook Ranch, where they will be in less danger than at Retreat Ranch, and the colonel will bring his cattle over to herd with mine.

"There will be five of us with my two colored men, and I shall take two pack-horses, as well as three extra animals, so we will be well equipped and supplied."

"You are going with a full hand, chief, to win the game," said Buckskin Sam, with a smile.

"And odds that we win," Colorado Carl put in.

"I will not bet against a certainty, Carl," responded the Ranger.

The next day Colonel Noland and Jessie arrived at the Overlook Ranch, and, an hour after, the trio of Texans and their black pards took the trail for the Northwest country.

CHAPTER V.

THE SOLDIER'S DAUGHTER.

SOME time previous to the reception of Buffalo Bill's letter by Mortimer Bainbridge at his Texan ranch, a daring robbery of a stage-coach had been committed upon the Northern Overland Trail, in which a fair passenger had been the greatest sufferer.

Tommy Todd had been driving his regular run along the Overland Trail, with no thought of danger, since the wiping out of the outlaw band known as the Toll-Takers, when suddenly he had been brought to a halt by a ringing command from some unseen person on the roadside.

Tom Todd was a fearless man and an expert driver, and he took the chances of losing his own life in an effort to dash through.

But he soon saw that escape was useless, as not one or two outlaws, but eight appeared in sight, all mounted well, armed to the teeth and masked.

"Don't play any funny business with me, Tommy Todd, if you have any value for your life," cried a stern voice as he covered the driver with his revolver and rode up to the coach.

"No, I guesses as how I won't, fer I really doesn't feel funny," was the cool reply, and Tom Todd accepted the situation without another word.

The odds were against him; the Toll-Takers had revived and he was in for it.

"Who have you inside, Tommy?" asked the leader.

"Waal, thar be two miners, a pretty gal, and a sutler from Rock Port."

"The miners and the sutler ought to be pretty good picking, while I guess the girl is only a soldier's sweetheart, and therefore poor as an empty haversack."

"That's so about the pretty gal, but the miners is dead busted and the sutler has got so leetle dust with him I hed ter credit him with his ride."

"I'll see for myself," muttered the leader, and he called to one of his men to dismount and throw open the coach-door.

"Now out of there, all of you!"

The first one to obey was a miner, rough-looking, but honest-faced and a trifle pale.

"Well, old Pick-ax, hand over your dust!" was the command.

"I've got but little."

"I want that little, pard, so lose no time."

The miner unbuckled a buckskin belt and threw it upon the ground.

"You have more."

"That is all."

"I say no; but after a while I'll talk to you."

"Next!"

The second one to dismount from the coach was another miner, and he, too, was forced to surrender his belt of gold-dust.

"Next!"

The sutler, a smooth-faced man with a cunning look out of his eyes, got out next.

"Your money I want, my friend."

"I have nothing, for I am going East to buy goods, and sent my money ahead weeks ago."

"You feared being robbed?"

"Yes."

"You have no money with you?"

"None."

"You are sure?"
 "So sure that I had to get Todd to credit me for my ride until I returned."

"Well, I will keep you a prisoner until you send for your money, that is all."

"Next!"
 The sutler winced at this, while, in response to the command of the outlaw, a beautiful face peered from the coach and a soft voice asked reproachfully:

"Would you rob a poor girl, sir?"
 "Well, yes, when I need money. Robbery is my trade, and I must work it for all it is worth. What have you with you, miss, of value?"

"A little jewelry of trifling value, and my purse containing seventy dollars," was the answer.

"Hand me your sachel, please."

"Oh, sir!"

"I must be obeyed," came the stern reminder.

The young girl handed over her leather traveling sachel, and opening it the outlaw began to coolly look over its contents.

At last he took up a letter, and, opening it, read it carefully through.

"Aha!" he said, as though he had made a discovery.

Then he took a loaf of bread from the sachel, and said:

"I think I shall take this for lunch."

"Oh, sir!" and the girl pleaded earnestly, until Tom Todd cursed the outlaws for a lot of murdering thieves.

Breaking open the loaf, with a smile the outlaw revealed the fact that the loaf had been hollowed out and in it was a case of jewels, a purse filled with gold, and several rolls of bank-bills.

The maiden buried her face in her hands and began to sob, but the hardened wretch coolly pocketed the riches, and, turning to the sutler, said sternly:

"Now, sir, pay your toll, or you go into irons and imprisonment until you can do so!"

The sutler vowed, swore, but all to no avail, and at last ripped open his bootleg and handed over the money he had sewn up there.

The miners also managed to find more money than was in their belts, and all were then told to get back into the coach, while Tom Todd, vowing vengeance, drove on.

For the men he did not care; but for the young girl he felt most keenly.

"It will be long weeks before I can get more money, and what am I to do meanwhile?" said the young girl, who had accepted a seat on the box with Tom Todd after leaving the scene of the robbery.

"You say your father is an army officer, miss?"

"My father is dead, sir; but he was an army officer, a captain."

"Waal, you kin git more money, miss, I guess?"

"Yes, by writing to friends for it; but it will take weeks."

"Waal, miss, when I gits to the end o' my run, I'll jist ride over with you to Fort Grand, whar they will be glad to entertain yer, I knows, until yer hears from home."

"Yer might stay at the station, but thar is only men thar, and the fort would be pleasantest, for thar is ladies thar, and lots o' handsome young officers who'll git gone on yer pretty face."

"I'll take yer to ther fort, and thar yer'll be welcome."

And Tom Todd was as good as his word, and Belle Braddock did indeed find a warm welcome at Fort Grand, where she at once became the guest of Heloise Hembold, whose beauty had won for her the name of the "Pearl of the Prairie."

CHAPTER VI.

THE BEAUTIFUL KIDNAPPER.

THE reception which Belle Braddock met with at Fort Grand was enough to make her heart glad.

Tom Todd rode up with her from the Overland Station, and leading a pack-horse carrying her luggage.

In a few words he told her story, and at once, from the colonel down, she received only the warmest welcome.

Heloise Hembold, the major's daughter, at once invited her to become the guest of her father and herself in their comfortable quarters, and Belle soon found herself in a most comfortable room, where she could remain as long as it was her pleasure to do so.

Heloise Hembold was the belle of the border forts, and certainly she was a most beautiful maiden, while one and all loved her for her noble nature as well as her beauty of face and form.

With large, lustrous black eyes, fringed by sweeping lashes, hair of a rich auburn hue, and a form the perfection of symmetry, she yet seemed unconscious of her loveliness.

Heloise was a heroine, too, as this romance will show, and it was whispered about that she was an heiress to a large fortune.

Major Hembold, a man in not very robust health, idolized his daughter, and dreaded the

day when he would have to give her up to some gallant claimant for her heart and hand.

The major had known Captain Braddock in earlier days, and was delighted to welcome his daughter to his home, especially as she was in distress.

"Braddock was a wild fellow, but married a lady in California, and settled down there, I heard, as also that he left his daughter rich."

"She is certainly a beautiful girl," said Major Hembold to his daughter, the day of Belle's arrival.

"She is indeed beautiful, father," was the response.

Nor was their praise of Belle Braddock's beauty exaggerated, for the fair traveler was indeed lovely in the extreme.

Her face won at a glance, and her manner was fascinating in the extreme.

Scarcely twenty she seemed, and yet she was an accomplished musician, and soon revealed that she possessed a number of other accomplishments.

She had wagered a kiss with a dozen young officers, against a box of bon-bons, and other things, that she could beat them shooting with rifle or revolver, and she had not a single wager to pay.

She proved herself a fair hand with the sword, rode superbly, threw a lasso with the skill of a Mexican, and, in fact, was an expert in border ways and sports.

She had not been a week at Fort Grand when the affection of the young officers was about equally divided between the fair stranger and Heloise Hembold.

But such a thing as "envy, hatred or malice" never entered the heart of Heloise against her lovely rival, whom she was really glad to see win favor with all.

Thus the two girls, so strangely thrown together, became fast friends in a very short while, and with all of her enjoyment of the society of the young officers, Belle Braddock seemed to really care to be more with Heloise than the lieutenants, whom she had infatuated.

Often she would propose to slip off for a walk or a ride together, with no male attendants, and though warned of the danger of doing so, she would toss her pretty head and reply that there was no danger in their going alone, other than was imagined by those not invited to accompany them.

Heloise was herself a perfect frontier girl, and she knew the surroundings of Fort Grand as well as did any officer, and just what danger to expect and how to avoid it, so that her father was not anxious as to her going, so long as she did not venture too far away.

Her horse was the fleetest at the fort, with only the animal which Belle Braddock had been given to ride by Captain Alfred Taylor, a dashing, handsome young cavalryman, and who felt glad to allow the beautiful girl the use of his favorite steed.

One day when the officers were all called out on duty, Belle Braddock ran into the room where Heloise sat and cried:

"Come, Heloise, all of the shoulder-straps are engaged now, so let us slip off for a ride on the prairie."

"We will take a lunch along and have a jolly picnic of it all by ourselves."

"I will gladly go, Belle," responded Heloise, and she at once began to get ready.

The horses were brought up to the rear of their quarters, and Belle came out with a saddle-hamper well-filled, and two heavy serapes had been strapped to the rear of their saddles.

Mounting, they told the orderly to let them out of the side-gate of the stockade, and away they went at a dash down the hill upon which the fort was situated.

"We must hurry, Heloise, or some of those shoulder-straps will see us and be upon our trail. How I hate to have men always around," said Belle, with a laugh.

"I rather like to have the handsome fellows about," responded Heloise archly, but she added:

"Still I enjoy a ride alone with you immensely, Belle, for you are such good company."

"Thank you; but what do you say to a dash down the river and a chance at an antelope, for I would like to carry one apiece back with no aid from the officers?"

"The very thing, Belle."

And away they sped into the timber that fringed the river.

At last Heloise said that they were going too far and must return to the fort.

"Nonsense, Heloise; we are not half a dozen miles away yet."

"Yes, we are; and we must return."

"Go to the ford with me, and I'll return with you then."

So Heloise continued on until the ford was reached, and there she halted.

"Belle, you do not realize the danger of our coming so far, so let us hurry back to the fort."

For reply, Belle Braddock bent over, and, seizing the bridle-rein of Heloise with one hand, with the other she drew her revolver from the saddle-holster and said, sternly:

"I have played my card well, Heloise Hembold, and you are my prisoner!"

"Belle Braddock was a decoy!"

CHAPTER VII.

THE LOST TRAIL.

BELLE BRADDOCK had been correct in her surmise that, if seen by the officers of the fort going off alone, they would be followed.

For doing so uninvited, the young officers would have the excuse that they feared to have them go alone, so followed as an escort.

When their duties were over, several went over to Major Hembold's quarters to visit the maidens, and learned that they had gone off for a ride.

"Who with, orderly?" asked Lieutenant Emory Ames, who had several times averred in confidence that he did not know which of the two girls he liked the best.

"Alone, sir."

"How long ago, orderly?"

"Over an hour, sir."

"Then I shall go in search of them. What do you say, Vincent?"

"With pleasure," was the response of Lieutenant Victor Vincent; and, fifteen minutes after, the two officers, well mounted, were following the trail which the major's orderly had said the ladies had taken.

They at once struck the trail of the two horses and pursued it easily for miles.

"They were riding rapidly all the way, Ames."

"Yes, and a precious pair of foolish girls they are, Vincent."

"I should think the fair Heloise had had a lesson which would deter her from going so far away from the fort."

"A woman never learns by experience, Ames, though a man will," was the sage rejoinder.

"Where can they be going?" asked Ames.

"*Quien sabe?*" responded Vincent, with a shrug of the shoulders.

At last they reached the ford, and Ames again remarked:

"Foolish girls! See! they have crossed the river, and it is a good fifteen-mile ride around to the other ford above the fort!"

"Can they have taken it?"

"Yes, for what else can they have done?"

"Shall we follow?"

"No, for it would be useless, as they would reach the fort before us. Let us ride back rapidly and beat them there."

"All right, and say nothing of this pursuit."

"Yes," and away they went rapidly back upon the trail.

It was nearly sunset when they came up to the stockade gate.

"Have Miss Hembold and Miss Braddock ridden in yet, sentinel?" asked Ames.

"No, sir."

Arriving at their quarters they found considerable alarm existing at the continued absence of the two ladies.

As they were not in sight, and the upper ford could be seen from the fort, several young officers were preparing to go in search of them when they heard the report of Ames and Vincent.

A party accordingly started by the upper ford, while Lieutenant Ames and several others went back the way they had come, for Buffalo Bill had come in and reported seeing suspicious trails on the other side of the river.

The two parties met a couple of hours after dark fifteen miles from the fort, and nothing had been seen, by either, of the missing women.

So there was nothing to do but return and hope that they would find them there.

But, in this hope they were doomed to disappointment, as they had not arrived.

At once all was excitement, and Buffalo Bill and Texas Jack, guiding Captain Taylor's troop, started for the ford where the two lieutenants had last seen the trail of the two horses ridden by the girls.

Major Hembold was in deep distress and had been urged not to go, Captain Alfred Taylor telling him that he would bring back the runaways if they were to be found.

Lieutenant Ames was an officer of the troop, so went along, stating that he felt no fatigue.

It was a couple of hours to dawn when the cavalry reached the ford, and as nothing could be done until daylight, they went into camp on the river-bank.

Just as the eastern horizon grew gray Buffalo Bill awakened, and, ten minutes after, he and Texas Jack were searching for the trail where Lieutenant Ames had seen it last.

The troopers had their breakfast and were in their saddles before sunrise, so that the scouts set off upon the trail.

Buffalo Bill felt that he was upon his mettle to find the maidens, and so stood at the head of the command, Texas Jack near him, and their two well-trained horses not far off waiting to follow their masters.

Then, with the eye of an expert, Buffalo Bill read the "signs" which Texas Jack alone of all the rest could also see.

"They halted here, and their horses must have refused to take the ford, as the tracks are scattered about, thick and deep."

"Strange, Cody, for my horse, which Miss Braddock rode, never balked at water before," Captain Taylor declared.

"Then, something is amiss here, that is certain, and here they entered the stream."

Crossing over, the trail was struck upon the other shore and followed.

"It branches off here to the left, down the river, Captain Taylor, instead of up toward the ford above the fort."

"Yes, and they were riding rapidly, and side by side."

"Miss Hembold certainly knew the danger of this course, down the river," Ames remarked.

"Yes, but she has taken the trail in spite of its danger," Captain Taylor responded.

On went the scouts, now side by side, on foot, and their eyes upon the ground reading every sign.

Behind them followed their horses; then came Captain Taylor and Lieutenant Ames, their two-score troopers following.

For a couple of miles the scouts led the way, keeping the trail unerringly. Then it bore again toward the river-bank.

"Cody?"

"Yes, Captain Taylor."

"The other ford is not far away."

"A mile only, sir."

"If they recrossed the river there, then they had the prairie upon one side back to the fort, and the swamp on the other?"

"Yes, sir."

"Had they taken the prairie they could have reached the fort by nightfall?"

"Yes, sir, if—"

"If what, Cody?"

"If there was nothing to prevent them."

"Ah, I understand. You believe that they have been captured?"

"Something has gone wrong with them, sir, for word was to be sent after us if they reached the fort after we left."

"Yes, and no word has come."

"None, sir," and Buffalo Bill pressed forward on the trail once more.

It led them at last to another ford, half a mile below the one crossed by the two girls.

The tracks of their horses were seen there, going into the river, but upon the other side there was no trace or sign to indicate where they had come out of the water.

Two days before there had been a rain, and the only tracks on the other shore were those of deer and deer.

Nor was there a back track to show that they had retraced their way.

"The trail is lost, Cody, and here in this stream."

"Yes, Captain Taylor, the trail is lost," responded Buffalo Bill dispiritedly.

It was evident that both he and Texas Jack were bewildered by the discovery they had made there at the ford.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE SURGEON SCOUT ARRIVES.

THE scouts being at fault, Captain Taylor and Lieutenant Ames grew very anxious and uneasy.

They knew that Buffalo Bill and Texas Jack read signs on the plains as scholars did a foreign book, and when they admitted that the trail was lost, there was indeed cause for anxiety.

For a long time Buffalo Bill and Texas Jack sat in their saddles, their horses now standing up to their girths in the river.

At that point was a shoal where the river could be crossed without much danger of a ducking, but above, as far as the eye could reach, the river was deep and the stream was flowing swiftly.

In the other direction, to a bend half a mile below, the river flowed on as rapidly, and it was deep enough to swim a horse at any point within view.

Still the tracks of the two horses ridden by Heloise and Belle had entered the river there at the ford and had not gone across to the other shore; nor had they gone back again the way they had come.

The soldiers had halted upon the bank, and their officers were at the water's edge.

The scouts were in the stream, and the tracks they trailed were plainly visible leading into the river, but not out again.

The imprints had not been in the least obliterated, and there was no mistaking the clean-cut, iron-shod hoof-marks of Captain Taylor's splendid mare, Black Cloud, or Lady Spitfire, the beautiful animal ridden by Heloise.

Neither officer spoke, but watched the scouts until the silence became oppressive.

At last Captain Taylor said:

"Well, Cody, what is to be done?"

"I can see but one thing, sir."

"And that is—"

"To go the way they did."

"Which way did they go?"

"They did not retrace their way, sir."

"No."

"They did not cross over to the other shore."

"Granted."

"They could not go up-stream against this current."

"Not they, Cody."

"Then they went down the river, sir."

"What?"

"They went down the stream, sir."

"You do not mean that they are drowned?"

"I hope not."

"Then what do you mean?"

"That they swam their horses down the river."

"Why, Cody, there is not a spot where they could come ashore within sight."

"No, captain."

"And perhaps not for miles below?"

"I do not know of such a place, sir."

"Then they were drowned."

"We can find out in but one way, sir."

"Well, how is that?"

"On the left bank a man can ride along close to the edge for miles, but not on the right bank, owing to water-washes and timber."

"Well?"

"I will unsaddle my horse, sir, take off my weapons and take the river, if you can find a couple more lariats in the command besides Jack's and mine."

"What do you need them for?"

"Well, I would like to tie one end about my waist, and have Jack go along the shore with the other end, so that if my horse should drown and I give out, I can be pulled to the bank, for no man can catch a grip on these steep and slippery sides."

"You are right; but I do not like you to take the risk, Cody."

"We must discover if the young ladies went this way, captain— Ah! there comes Surgeon Powell!"

As Buffalo Bill spoke, a horseman appeared on the hill, coming at a canter toward the ford.

He was in a fatigue uniform, wore a black sombrero with a gold cord encircling it, and a belt of arms, while a rifle hung at his saddle-horn.

His horse was a large roan, and showed his mettle in his small head, arched neck and clean limbs.

The rider was a stern-faced man, with long, waving black hair, and looked just what he was—the resolute soldier, daring plainsman, and one whose nature was cast in a noble mold, whose heart was true as steel to a friend.

"Ah, Frank, what news from the fort?" called out Captain Taylor, as Surgeon Frank rode down to the water's edge.

"No news of the young ladies, Taylor, and I am glad to find you are on their trail," was the answer, and the Surgeon Scout saluted Lieutenant Ames and the two scouts pleasantly.

"Yes, we tracked them this far, and Buffalo Bill is just thinking of undertaking a foolhardy act, I fear, to see what more can be done to trail them," said Captain Taylor.

"I am with you, Bill; but what is the situation?"

In a few words it was made known to him, when Powell said, after a moment of thought:

"If your desire is to look for landing-places, Bill, on the banks, you can reach but one side, so I will take the other, for I have a lariat, and our stake-ropes will give us all the line we need."

"I am with you, Cody, for, with you, I feel that they could have gone no other way, and if they went down the river on their horses, then they were prisoners, that is certain."

"Prisoners, surgeon?" asked Emory Ames.

"Yes."

"To whom?"

"That we must find out."

"But, there are no other tracks visible, than those of their horses."

"Very true, but a moccasin would not make a trail here which we could follow."

"Nor would a boat make any sign," Buffalo Bill added.

"I see that you have both hit upon the same idea, Cody, you and Powell."

"And I do not believe their captors were Indians," Texas Jack remarked.

"No, for red-skins would not be dismounted so near the fort," Powell declared.

"Then you believe they are captives?" Captain Taylor asked.

"They most certainly are, Taylor, and from all I can glean of the case the plot has been as clever a one as that by which Miss Heloise was captured before."

"Ah! now I begin to understand you, Powell."

"Yes, it has been a clever plot to kidnap her, and Miss Braddock being with her and the opportunity offering to kidnap Miss Hembold, both were taken."

"I half believe you are right, Powell."

"I know he is right, Captain Taylor, for I had the same idea, as did also Jack," Buffalo Bill responded.

"Well, you scouts are wonders, I admit frankly," the captain said with a light laugh, while Buffalo Bill urged:

"Let us lose no time about following. Captain Taylor, may I ask you to divide your force and send them down the river upon either bank, while we will need strong men to hold the life-lines for us?"

The orders were given and the two daring swimmers threw aside their boots, coats, hats and belts to prepare for the peril before them.

CHAPTER IX.

THE DARING SWIMMERS.

THE lariats and stake-ropes tied together made two very long lines, and strong ones too.

One end of each was taken by a soldier on horseback, with a turn around his saddle-horn. They then rode to the top of the bank on the left shore.

The force was then divided, twenty men going, under Lieutenant Ames, down the right of the river, and the balance, under Captain Taylor, following the left shore, down.

With the latter Texas Jack went, and the saddles and clothing of the two daring men were carried by a couple of troopers on their horses.

Then, with only the bridles upon their horses, the two men sprung lightly upon their backs and rode them into the swiftly-flowing river.

They lost their footing before they had gotten ten feet from the ford. The sagacious animals seemed to realize their danger and that their riders were taking desperate odds.

The current was so swift that to stem it would be impossible for horse or man, so that once they had started there was no retracing their way.

A moment more and the two horses were borne along down the surging stream, Buffalo Bill in advance of Surgeon Frank Powell, and the lariats about the waists of the two men leading to the mounted soldiers on the left bank and following them as they swept swiftly down the river.

It was a thrilling sight, and one which the beholders never forgot. Were Buffalo Bill and Surgeon Powell going to their death down that torrent?

The lariats were long enough to allow the two scouts to sweep across to the other shore, and were drawn almost taut.

The surgeon kept his eyes upon the left bank, watching every break in the wall of rock, while Buffalo Bill eyed the right shore with equal watchfulness.

On they swept, the horses swimming strongly, and having nothing more to do than to steady themselves in the current, as they rolled along, for they were carried at a speed of over six miles an hour.

Half a mile had been gone over, and twice the river had swung around a bend; but left the bank continued entirely clear of timber, or of any other obstructions in the way of the two mounted cavalymen who carried the land end of the lines.

They were cool-headed fellows, too, and watched the scouts with a critical eye, not doing ought to check their progress.

"Ho, Bill, yonder is a break on my side, so move over toward the right," cried Powell, who was just the length of his horse in the rear of Cody, but well over toward the right shore.

"I see it, and we can halt there for a rest, as our horses are feeling it," answered Buffalo Bill.

"Yes, and it may be more than a resting-place," returned Doctor Powell.

The two men swayed, rather than guided their horses in that direction.

The break in the bank was not through the cliff, but near the water, and the ripple there showed that there was a shoal.

As they neared it both saw that there was a wide, cavern-like crevice in the bank, out of which a stream of water poured into the river.

Their horses soon touched bottom, and, a moment after, stood but knee-deep upon the shoal directly in front of the opening, which, from the opposite shore did not appear like a break in the bank, as the cliff had a bend in it a few feet from the opening.

"I'll push in, Frank, and see where it leads," said Buffalo Bill, freeing himself from the lariat about his waist and giving the end to Surgeon Powell to hold.

The soldiers had halted on the opposite shore, and all were anxiously watching the scouts.

The rock merely arched for a score of feet, not forming a cavern, and through this the scout made his way out into a narrow canyon, down which dashed a small stream.

The banks on either side towered thirty feet over his head, and the canyon, or waterway, was not over five feet wide—a mere chasm in the rocks.

Following it, Buffalo Bill, after a walk of an eighth of a mile, came to where it rose abruptly for a few yards and then crossed a well-worn trail.

The party of soldiers under Lieutenant Emory Ames had just gone by, the scout knew, having had to flank the stream that flowed down the ravine.

But there was another trail which seemed to rivet the eyes of the scout, for he stood some time regarding it, then crossed the large track, still following the stream of water.

After a walk of a hundred yards he halted, glanced about him, and turning abruptly, retraced his way to the river.

"You have made a discovery, Bill?" said the Surgeon Scout, quietly.

"I have found their trail, so we need go no further down the river."

"Good! I am with you!"

Buffalo Bill then hailed Captain Taylor, told

him to have the men haul in the lines when they released their end, and retrace their way to the ford and across the river down the shore to meet them, adding that he would overtake Lieutenant Ames and recall him.

Then the two led their horses up the ravine until they came to the trail of the troopers, when, springing upon the back of his own animal, Buffalo Bill said:

"Push on, Doc, and see what you can discover, while I ride after Lieutenant Ames.

"When we get back here, I will come on after you and have Texas Jack follow when he arrives with our saddles, clothes and arms, for I believe we are going to find those young ladies."

"From the tracks we saw on our way up the ravine, Bill, we are on the trail of their horses certainly; but they are in the clutches of clever scoundrels, so we must go carefully to work."

"Yes, their captors are no fools, and yet they can hardly expect that we have found their trail, which never would have been done had you not discovered that break in the cliff.

"But, I must be off," and Buffalo Bill dashed away after Lieutenant Ames and his men.

Surgeon Powell followed on up the stream, and here and there his quick eye detected a track which he knew to have been made by the horses ridden by the young women.

The stream led him up into a ridge, along the top of which was a trail, turning to the left, and which had not crossed the little brook.

"There were a dozen horses here, and shod ones too. Indians were not the kidnappers of those girls, so it must be that villain Monte Miranda.

"Well, we have the advantage, for he believes he has safely covered up his trail."

The Surgeon Scout retraced his way to where Lieutenant Ames's trail passed the stream.

That officer had just returned, with Buffalo Bill, and soon after Captain Taylor and Texas Jack rode up, the troopers following, a quarter of a mile behind.

"We have found their trail, Captain Taylor, and Doctor Powell will tell you what he has discovered up on the ridge," Buffalo Bill explained, as Taylor rode up.

Surgeon Powell told his story, and then all felt sure that the two girls were in the hands of Overland road-agents.

After a short rest they set off up the stream in Indian file, Buffalo Bill leading. Ere long they struck the trail of the kidnappers. Then they pressed rapidly on, hoping to come up with the outlaws before nightfall.

CHAPTER X.

THE LAST RESORT.

THE trail made by the kidnappers, from where they left the stream, was an easy one to follow, as they had seemed to take no pains to cover it up.

The two men who had so daringly braved the torrent, had seen in the little ravine evidence that a number of horses had been in hiding there.

They followed the trail of these same animals across the main trail down the right bank of the river, which it crossed by keeping on in the water.

A mile beyond this, on the ridge, the kidnappers' trail turned out of the stream and was there plainly revealed, and to the practiced eyes of the bordermen showed that there were nine horsemen in the party.

Two of these horses were those ridden by Heloise and Belle Braddock, for their well-known tracks were often visible among the others.

The kidnappers kept to the ridge in all its windings for a distance of several miles, when the trail turned down a dry canyon toward the river.

To only the most practiced eye was the trail here visible, but the three scouts followed it unerringly.

At last it came out upon some broken ground, and soon after ended at a wild and rocky point on the river.

That the kidnappers had entered the river seemed certain, yet where had they landed on the other shore, was the question.

That shore presented no landing-place, for it was high, steep as a wall, and up and down, as far as the eye could reach, no break was visible in it.

Captain Taylor, Surgeon Powell and Buffalo Bill searched the other shore carefully with their glasses, but no break in the rocky wall could be discovered.

Then it was decided to camp upon the spot and make a deliberate search of the surroundings.

"You suspect there is some trick in it, Powell?" said Captain Taylor.

"I am sure of it, as is Buffalo Bill and Texas Jack."

"But to discover the trick is the question?"

"Yes, Taylor, that is yet to be done. But how are you off for provisions?"

"I have three days' supplies."

"Good! Then my advice is to camp right

here on the trail and let Cody, Jack and myself work out the problem."

"A good idea," assented Captain Taylor.

He gave the necessary orders, and the men were soon in camp.

Buffalo Bill, Surgeon Powell and Texas Jack, with Captain Taylor and Lieutenant Ames, then held a council to see what could be done.

The trail ran to the river-bank and there ended.

The river, at that point, was wide, with a broken shore on the side where they were, and a wall of cliffs on the other, so there was no landing-place in view for the horses to get out had they swum across.

On the shore where they were encamped there was a possibility of their following down the stream, though the banks were rough in the extreme.

Still, as Surgeon Powell was a superb swimmer, it was decided that he should take to the river again, with Buffalo Bill and Texas Jack following upon the bank as best they could, on foot.

They were to carry lariats with them to lend aid to Powell, should he need it, and they could reach him. In case of any discovery, Texas Jack was to give the weird, wild call so well known to his army comrades, and which could be heard a long way off. It was a call peculiar to plantation negroes in the South, in *antebellum* days, and when expertly given could be heard even miles away. The brave Texan had caught the weird, wild, pathetic cry to perfection when a boy in "Dixie."

The surgeon then again prepared for his swim, while the two scouts set out on foot as Frank Powell plunged into the stream, the admiration of the officers and their men.

Away he went, with mighty strokes, until he disappeared from the view of the watchers, and, struggling along the rugged shore, hurried the scouts.

Thus an hour passed, and another, and darkness came upon the scene.

The soldiers had their suppers and grouped themselves about the camp-fires among the rocks, after the sentinels had been placed around the bivouac.

All seemed impressed with their surroundings, the dark-flowing, murmuring river rolling by, the sighing of the wind among the pines, and the uncertain fate of the two beautiful girls.

One by one the soldiers dropped away from the camp-fires, rolled themselves in their blankets and sought rest.

But Captain Taylor and Lieutenant Ames still sat by their camp-fire conversing in subdued, anxious tones.

Where had the scouts gone?

They should have returned long before, the officers thought.

At length the challenge of the sentry down the river-bank rung out sharp and stern:

"Halt! who comes there?"

A response was made which the officer did not catch, and soon after three forms advanced toward them.

They were the surgeon and his scout pards.

"By Jupiter, Powell, but I am glad to see you back, for Ames and I were frightening ourselves with all manner of fears regarding you.

"Sit down! and, Brandy, bring some supper at once," said Captain Taylor, his last words being addressed to his negro servant, who hastened to obey.

"I am glad to get back, Taylor, for I assure you I had a hard struggle for life in that river. I found no landing-place for ten miles, so what has become of those kidnappers?"

"You swam ten miles down that river, Frank!" asked Captain Taylor with admiring amazement.

"Yes, and but for Bill and Jack would not have gotten out then, I fear, for they had to throw me the lariats and haul me up to the bank."

"And there was no sign of where the outlaws could have landed?"

"Not a sign; but we will try it again to-morrow."

And on the morrow they did try; but night came and no discovery had been made, so they were forced to give it up and return to the fort.

Still Buffalo Bill and his scouts, aided by Surgeon Powell, kept up the search for the missing maidens day after day until weeks had gone by.

The cavalry, under Captain Taylor, Lieutenant Ames and other officers, nobly did their duty, too, but all without avail, and at last all could see that poor Major Hembold was breaking down under the great strain, suspense and sorrow he endured.

One night, while seated at mess, Buffalo Bill suddenly sprang to his feet, and his voice rung like a trumpet as he cried:

"I have it! They shall be found!"

All were startled at his vehemence, and Texas Jack asked quickly:

"What's the game now, Bill?"

"Come with me to Surgeon Powell's quarters and you shall know," and Cody led the way to the army home of the Surgeon Scout.

Then the three had a long talk, and, as a result, Buffalo Bill wrote a letter to Mortimer

Bainbridge, the Texan ranchero; and the next morning it was sent by special courier to be mailed at a station on the Overland.

That that letter was received, the reader has already seen.

CHAPTER XI.

THE NEW COMMANDANT.

A NEW commandant had come to Fort Grand, and many other changes had taken place along the line of frontier posts.

The gallant Fifth Cavalry had three companies at Fort Grand, having come down from McPherson, and Surgeon Frank Powell had been put on duty at Fort Grand.

There, too, the scouts, under their chief, Buffalo Bill, had been sent, and the post had become the most important one in the line of fortifications.

Two heavy guns, under crews from the —d Heavy Artillery, were mounted upon the fort, and in addition there was a company of light artillery, and a couple of battalions of infantry; so, with the company of Indian scouts under Major Frank North, the army teamsters, the sutlers and the hangers-on, there was a considerable settlement at Fort Grand.

The fort was splendidly situated upon a heavily-timbered hill, with ample feeding-lands for cattle surrounding, a brook running down the hill, and the river flowing by, half a mile distant.

To surprise it would be impossible, and an army would be unable to carry it by storm.

The headquarters, and the quarters of the officers fronted the parade-ground, over which it looked down into the valley to the river, and far beyond to the mountains.

The river-ford, a quarter of a mile away, was commanded by one of the heavy guns, as also was the valley, while the other gun swept the prairie for miles.

Many of the families of the officers were there, so that, altogether, Fort Grand was a delightful place to dwell, to those who liked life on the far frontier and were indifferent to its dangers.

The new commandant had arrived just after the kidnapping of the two girls, and he was an "unknown quantity" as yet.

A handsome, stern-faced man was Colonel Barrett, and every inch a soldier he had the reputation of being.

A few in Fort Grand had known him before, but to most all present he was a stranger, save in reputation.

He had quietly assumed command, arriving by stage-coach alone one day, for the Overland Trail for the stages ran by the fort, and he had left his escort, horses, servant and baggage to follow leisurely.

Colonel Roylston, the late commander, was on sick leave, and Major Hembold was in temporary command.

All were pleased with the calm-faced, dignified commander, but knew that they would find in him a thorough disciplinarian.

The condition of Major Hembold was such that he at once urged him to leave off duty for awhile and try to recuperate, and expressed the determination to rescue his daughter from her kidnappers, and to punish them to the fullest extent for their crime.

More he did not say until he had been a couple of weeks at Fort Grand. Then he sent for Captain Alfred Taylor and asked almost abruptly:

"May I inquire, Captain Taylor, why the rescue of Miss Hembold and her friend has not been accomplished?"

The question, put as it was, quite startled Captain Taylor, who had been untiring in his efforts to discover and rescue the two girls, so he replied:

"It has been an utter impossibility thus far, Colonel Barrett, to accomplish their rescue, or to discover their hiding-place."

"Pray state the situation to me fully, sir, for, except from rumor, I have heard nothing. Make it, as it were, an official report."

Captain Taylor was glad to see that the new commander was interested in the case, and made known the situation fully. Then he added:

"There are two persons, Colonel Barrett, whose stories I would like you to hear, for they are fully acquainted with the entire facts."

"Who are they, sir?"

"One is an officer of the army, Surgeon Powell, whose wonderful skill as a frontiersman and his daring have made him famous as the Surgeon Scout."

"I have heard of him, and as a most remarkable man, as fine a scout as he is a surgeon, and one who has had a strange, romantic history."

"Yes, sir, Frank Powell is a very remarkable man, and is the peer of Buffalo Bill as a scout, and the latter so regards him, while they are boon pards."

"And the other to whom you referred?"

"Is Buffalo Bill, sir."

"He has been away on a scout since my coming, but returned and reported this morning while I was out, so that I have not met him; but I know of him, also, as a man whose deeds are world-famed."

"These two men, sir, know the whole situa-

tion, and I am sure date the motives for the capture of Miss Hembold back to the time of her former kidnapping by the Toll-Takers."

"Orderly!"

The orderly instantly appeared, and was given the order:

"Present my compliments to Surgeon Powell and request his presence at my quarters, after which seek Chief of Scouts Cody and say that I desire to see him."

The orderly saluted and departed on his errand, while the colonel gleaned what more he could from Captain Taylor, in regard to happenings upon the border.

"I am an utter stranger here, Captain Taylor, almost to every one at Fort Grand, and all is new to me, for I have been stationed in California the past few years; but I am anxious to master the situation and will do all in my power to do so at once."

Just then Surgeon Powell entered and was greeted pleasantly by the colonel, who then turned and shook hands with Buffalo Bill, who came in after Frank Powell and was introduced to the commandant by Captain Taylor.

"What a superb pair!" muttered the colonel, to himself, as he gazed upon the two men before him and bade them be seated.

"I have been having a little talk with Captain Taylor, gentlemen, who has been coaching me in my duties here, in a kindly way. I sent for you at his request, to talk over this unfortunate kidnapping affair of Miss Hembold and her guest, something over two months ago."

"May I ask, Surgeon Powell, for your view of the affair?"

"Certainly, Colonel Barrett, I will give you my idea of the kidnapping in a nutshell, and that is that the Danites are at the bottom of the outrage."

"Ah! the Mormons, then, give you some trouble out here?"

"In a quiet, underhand way, yes, sir, though I do not believe their leaders sanction the acts of those wrong-doers."

"The truth is that the Danites broke up into small bands, some of whom went to mining, others invaded Government and Indian lands and a few took to outlawry, when the Church nominally dissolved the organization."

"Among the latter was a chief known as a renegade American, and a Mexican, who was formerly an officer of Lanceros."

"The latter knew Miss Hembold, and he it was who abducted her before. When we wiped out the Toll-Takers he made his escape, but I am sure he now has returned, gathered his lawless comrades and has taken her a captive a second time."

"To find that man will be to find Miss Hembold, I am quite certain; but, let me ask you to hear Cody's story of the affair, for he knows the trail from its starting-point."

"I thank you, Surgeon Powell, and I shall be glad to hear what my chief of scouts has to say," responded the colonel.

CHAPTER XII.

BUFFALO BILL EXPLAINS.

EVERYTHING in the manner and appearance of Buffalo Bill indicated to Colonel Barrett that he was not the man to waste words, or to talk at random.

"To explain, Colonel Barrett, I must tell you, and those present, some things in confidence."

"Major Hembold, I am aware, married a Mexican lady, when he was stationed upon the Rio Grande. Her father hated Americans, so it was a runaway match, and Mrs. Hembold did not again return to Mexico."

"She died some years after, leaving her daughter to the care of the major. He placed her at boarding-school in New York, until her graduation, when she came West to share with him his army life."

"Whether there is some legal complication in the way, as regards a fortune in Mexico, or not, I do not know; but certain it is that Miss Hembold was visited at boarding-school by a Mexican, who afterward, when her father was absent from Fort L—, visited her again there."

"All supposed him to be her lover, and she did not deny the fact."

"Then the Toll-Takers became most troublesome, and on one occasion, when the officers of Rock Outpost gave an entertainment, Miss Hembold and other ladies started there in an Overland coach."

"By a most daring and clever plot the escort was called back from the coach by a pretended order from Colonel Royleston, and that same night a sergeant and two men overtook the stage. Giving his name as a soldier of the fort, and having a led horse, he told Miss Heloise that her father had met with an accident and he had come after her."

"She fell into the trap, and went, thus becoming the captive of this Mexican, Monte Miranda, who was lieutenant of the Toll-Takers."

"Wild Bill and I then took the trail, and from Fort B— Surgeon Powell and Texas Jack, thoroughly disguised, also went on the track of the Toll-Takers. Jack and the doctor knew us, of course, but kept their secret, and

so thorough was their disguise that neither Wild Bill nor myself suspected them."

"We all made our way to the mining-camps rejoicing in the name of Glory Hallelujah City, and Bill's life and mine would have been lost there but for a mysterious man known under several names."

"For instance, he was known as 'Bandbox Bill,' 'The Man in Black,' 'The Bravo in Broadcloth,' and several other border names."

"He was a mystery to all, always in the right place when wanted, but no one knew aught about him, or how he lived."

"He dressed in deep black, but though showing no weapons, had his sleeves full of them when needed, and it was magnificent sleight of hand that drew them."

"He seemed to have a wonderful power over men, and thorough desperadoes were there whom he commanded as though they were slaves."

"It was through his advice that Wild Bill and I struck the right trail to the Toll-Takers' retreat. He also started Surgeon Powell, who was disguised as an Indian, and Texas Jack, looking like an old trapper, upon our trail."

"We were told to capture a certain mysterious phantom of the trails, or at least so called, and known as the Woman in Black."

"This woman rode a black horse, dressed in deep black, and often warned the coaches of danger, as well as scouts and soldiers. She was known, though, to be a decoy of the Toll-Takers."

"This Woman in Black we met, and she told us that Miss Hembold was a captive in the Toll-Takers' camp, under the lieutenant, Monte Miranda, as the chief, Major Mephisto, was often absent from the retreat."

"We expected to meet the Woman in Black again, and had captured one of the outlaw band, a brave fellow, too, and a remarkable character known as Iron-Heart Dick, and Pony-Rider Dick."

"But, the Toll-Takers tracked us, got us into a trap, and just then Surgeon Powell and Texas Jack came to our rescue."

"But, though it helped us, it did not save us, and our fate would have been doubtful had not Major Mephisto appeared upon the scene."

"To our amazement we recognized in Major Mephisto our Bravo in Broadcloth from Hallelujah City!"

"We then, through him, exchanged Iron-Heart Dick for Monte Miranda, and retreated; and the Mexican told us a story which we believed—that Miss Hembold would be restored to us if we would allow him to slip into the outlaw retreat."

"We did so, but never saw him after, though we did receive from Major Mephisto a letter which caused us to plan and capture the Toll-Takers and their camp, with the aid of Captain Taylor and his troop, and we rescued Miss Hembold as well."

"Then the man whom we believed to be the robber chief, told us that he was the twin brother of that man, who had become a Mormon, and then an outlaw, commanding a company of Danites, and was known as Captain Branch."

"This twin brother had ruined his, our informant's life; they had met and the outlaw had fallen, and he had boldly assumed the part of the Toll-Takers' chief, and thus entered their retreat."

"Secretly, as he showed us the proof, he was a Government detective, and through him, with our aid, the Toll-Takers were wiped out."

"The Woman in Black he spoke of as his sister, but I have reason to believe that she was his sister-in-law, his wicked brother having deceived her into marrying him, where she, not knowing her lover was a twin, had only discovered it when too late."

"More than that he had been on a trail of revenge—that he was secretly a detective, and had, by personating his brother, discovered all the Danite secrets—had a Secret-Service league on the border—he told us nothing of himself, but he pledged himself if we ever needed him to come to us."

"Telling me that Monte Miranda was the kidnapper of Miss Hembold, I wrote to the Man in Black begging him to come to our aid. He alone can track these outlaws down. Where we have failed this extraordinary man will succeed, I am certain."

"And with what result, Mr. Cody?" asked Colonel Barrett, who had listened with deepest interest to Buffalo Bill's strange story.

"I found a letter from him awaiting me, sir, to-day, when I returned from scouting."

"And what does it say?"

"The Man of Mystery will come, sir, but upon strange conditions," responded Buffalo Bill.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE TEXAN'S CONDITIONS.

As Colonel Barrett and all with him were anxious to hear the letter from the Texan ranchero, Buffalo Bill took from his pocket an official envelope, sealed and registered.

It was addressed in a bold hand, full of character, and mailed from a small town in Texas.

Some time before the scout said that he had

received a telegraph dispatch, that he also exhibited, and which read

"Will keep to my word, as per letter of conditions. B. B."

"These initials doubtless stand for Bandbox Bill, and he did, as Surgeon Powell asked him to do, in a P. S. to my letter to him, send his response to the nearest place where he could wire it."

"But here is his letter, Colonel Barrett."

"Read it, Mr. Cody, for where such men as you and Surgeon Powell have faith in a man's powers being greater than yours upon the frontier, I confess to a great curiosity to hear what he has to say."

"From your description of this Man of Mystery, he is certainly a marvel."

"May I ask his name?"

"That he gave me in confidence, to write him only if Monte Miranda again was heard from."

"But are you sure that this kidnapper of these young ladies is the Mexican?"

"I am pretty well assured, sir, for all signs point to him as the kidnapper. He escaped us, and is a Danite as well as an outlaw, while he had some deep motive for wishing to get Miss Hembold into his power."

"Then the Toll-Takers have revived, and the clever capture of Miss Hembold is just like Monte Miranda."

"Do your comrades of the trail also regard him as the kidnapper?"

"I do, colonel," answered Captain Taylor.

"I also am certain that the Mexican is the man," responded Surgeon Powell.

"And Wild Bill and Texas Jack have the same opinion, Colonel Barrett," Buffalo Bill added.

"And what thinks this Man of Mystery?"

"He takes no other idea, sir, than that Miranda is the man; and more—he makes suggestions which surprise me greatly, and will also all of you, I feel sure."

"Then let us have the letter, Cody," commanded the colonel, and Buffalo Bill proceeded to read the noted Texan detective's missive as follows:

"MY DEAR CODY:—

"I can hardly say that your letter was a surprise to me, knowing as I did that Monte Miranda was not hanged, or a prisoner for life, and even had it been the latter there would have been cause for anxiety, as he is no ordinary mortal."

"Your surmise, without proof, regarding his being at the bottom of this bold kidnapping scheme is the correct one."

"He had a motive most personal and advantageous to his interests, in making Miss Hembold his prisoner, and she will remain so until he can bring her to terms, or she is rescued."

"Kindly say to her stricken father from me that he need feel no anxiety regarding harm befalling his daughter, though in the hands of a villain, if only for the reason that Monte the Mexican has too much at stake to in any way wrong Miss Hembold."

"If he has taken her, as you believe, to Salt Lake City, she is equally as safe, and her anxiety of mind and close confinement will be about the only inconvenience she will suffer."

"You refer to her guest being captured with her, so she will doubtless be a fellow companion in Miss Hembold's captivity."

"But who is this fair guest?"

"You refer to her simply as a stranger in the fort, and I have had so much cause to sift anything of a suspicious nature, that you will pardon me if I half-suspect Miss Hembold's fair friend as being the traitress."

"By Heaven! what a charge he makes!" cried Colonel Barrett with some show of anger.

"I had not thought of that before, and now I also suspect her, colonel," Frank Powell coolly remarked.

"Who and what is she?" asked the colonel.

"She was a passenger on the Overland from California, sir, and was robbed of her satchel containing her jewels and money."

"Tom Todd, the driver, brought her here to await until she could write home to her friends in the East for funds, and Miss Heloise at once made her her guest."

"Do you know aught about her, Captain Taylor?" asked Colonel Barrett, for the captain had made the above explanation.

"She was a beautiful girl of about twenty, sir, and her name was Belle Braddock, while she said she was the only child of the late Major Braddock of the army."

"My God!" and Colonel Barrett sprung to his feet and crossed the room several times in quick succession.

Then he said quickly:

"Describe her, please, Captain Taylor."

This the captain did, and with a sigh Colonel Barrett resumed his seat and said, with no explanation of his excited manner of a moment before:

"What else does this Man of Mystery say, Cody?"

The scout then resumed his reading of the letter:

"Of course my charge is based upon suspicion; Miss Hembold's friend may be all right; but then, as she was a stranger, and they were captured together, she may be a decoy of this man, Monte the Mexican."

"I advise you, therefore, to find out for yourself the antecedents of the young lady, and discover if

she can be regarded as the one who decoyed Miss Hembold into a trap set for her by Monte—if she is not that artful scoundrel's accessory and aid.

"If I am wrong, then you will have to look elsewhere, but the traitor was in the fort, and, somehow, I am convinced that I have surmised correctly, as future developments will show.

"Now, as to my coming to your aid.

"Monte was born a gentleman, was an officer of the Mexican Army, but his true nature soon showed itself and he became a spendthrift, forger and murderer, to end as a fugitive and outlaw lieutenant of the Toll Takers.

"He allied himself with the Mormons, became a Danite chief and as such holds certain powers, so is dangerous, especially if he is at the head of another outlaw band.

"I was a Danite simply from impersonating one whom you know, but the cheat has never been known to the Mormons, so under certain conditions I can hold influence there.

"I am willing to help you, Cody, and also that unfortunate young lady, for I can only do my duty where a friend calls for my aid; but there are conditions, and they are that I be wholly unknown, even to you, in my actions.

"I will, with others, take the trail, but will do so under an assumed name, as an *Unknown*, and go about it in my own way.

"You, your noble friends, Powell, Wild Bill, Texas Jack, Jack Crawford and the gallant Captain Taylor, with his Boys in Blue, must be near to help me when I call upon them, but I must remain unknown to all, except those who come with me as my allies.

"We must ferret secrets out by secret actions alone, and fight the Devil with fire to win success.

"I shall start on the trail before you receive this letter, and to know whom I may depend upon, I send you herewith a dozen stars.

"They are, as you see, of crimson hue, and I wish you and your comrades to wear them upon the front of your hats.

"By this sign I will know my League of the Crimson Star, and, my word for it, when we reach the end of the rope, Mexican Monte's neck will be in the noose and Major Hembold and his daughter will have no cause to longer fear him.

"Such are my purposes and conditions, and feeling that you accept them, I shall start upon the trail long before this reaches your hand.

"With remembrance to your brave pards in buckskin, believe me.

"Faithfully yours,
"THE DETECTIVE."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE SUSPICION WELL FOUNDED.

THE strange letter of Mortimer Bainbridge, the Texan ranchero, was listened to by all with an interest that showed in the faces of those present.

Especially had Colonel Barrett shown deeper interest in it since the bold charge or assumption made by the ranchero against Belle Braddock.

True to his pledge to the man who had so befriended him in the past, Buffalo Bill did not make known his home or address.

Then he showed the crimson stars sent by the ranchero.

They were five-pointed Texas stars, set in garnets, which were of blood red hue, and glittered brilliantly in the sunlight.

The frame was of solid gold, and it was arranged with a heavy pin to fasten into the hat.

They had been the insignia of the ranchero and his detectives when known as the Lone Star League, but were then worn out of sight to be shown only by secret sign by those who wore them.

When the pretty trinkets had been examined by the colonel and those present in his quarters, Captain Taylor asked:

"Well, Cody, what do you think of the conditions of your unknown friend?"

"I accept them, captain, and gladly, while I believe he can aid us more if unknown to us."

"Yes, and it would not surprise me to find him again among the Toll-Takers," Surgeon Powell added.

"He does not refer to the Woman in Black?" said Colonel Barrett, thoughtfully.

"No, sir; but, Colonel Barrett, can we not discover if his suspicions against Miss Braddock are well founded?" Cody inquired.

"Who knows her in the past?" asked the officer.

"Not a soul, sir."

"Who knew her as Miss Braddock?"

"No one, colonel."

"Was Miss Braddock known to any one in the fort?"

"She was not?"

The colonel thought a moment, and then asked:

"Did she say she was robbed in the coach?"

"Yes, sir, there is no doubt of that," interrupted Captain Taylor, and he told the story of the coach robbery as he had heard it from Tom Tidd.

"Who saw her jewels and money?"

"No one, I believe; but her sachel containing them was taken, sir."

"You had her word, then, only for what was lost?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did she write home to her friends after her arrival here?"

"That I do not know, sir."

"What was her behavior?"

"That of a very lovable woman, one who was fond of teasing the officers, a perfect coquette, and who seemed devoted to Miss Hembold."

"She was a fine rider, doubtless?"

"Perfect, sir."

"And a dead shot with revolver and rifle?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did you hear her sing?"

"Yes, sir, often, and she sung admirably."

"A contralto voice, perhaps?"

"Yes, sir."

"She sketched a little, too?"

"Yes, colonel, and it seems you have met her."

"I have, Captain Taylor."

"Then the Unknown Trailing is wrong in his suspicions regarding her?"

"Not at all. On the contrary, he certainly is right," was the almost solemn reply.

No one questioned the colonel, and yet they saw that he knew more of Belle Braddock than he cared to reveal.

At last he said:

"It is strange I did not hear Miss Braddock's name mentioned before to-day; but, when spoken to of the kidnapping, it was always referred to as Miss Hembold and her friend's capture.

"Now, gentlemen, let me say to you what I do not care to have go any further: I know the woman who is under this Man of Mystery's suspicion, and he is quite right, for I feel confident she decoyed Miss Hembold into the trap.

"Perhaps I had better explain still more:

"Major Braddock was my best friend, and when he died he left his daughter to my guardianship.

"She was a beautiful girl, but had been thrown from her horse and suffered from a blow on her head, from which it was hoped she would eventually recover.

"Perhaps she would have done so but for the fact that she had a rival at school—a girl with a beautiful face but the heart of a devil.

"This girl was so like Miss Braddock in appearance that she was constantly doing things for which Belle got the credit and reprimands.

"A young man meeting Miss Braddock fell in love with her, as she did with him, but this school rival separated them by false reports.

"Then came the accident, and fever followed, which nearly ended fatally.

"The other girl, meanwhile, had become a schemer for wealth, and was a bold, bad woman, and, hating Miss Braddock, in sheer deviltry one day she had put up in type a notice of her marriage with the young man whom Belle still dearly loved.

"The result of this cruel hoax was that my poor ward became mentally distempered from the shock and I was forced to place her in an asylum, where she now is.

"What became of her tormentor I never knew until now, though I heard that she had gone to Salt Lake and had become the bride of a Mormon of rank.

"Now I realize that your unknown friend, Cody, is right, and that she is playing a deep game by impersonating the poor girl she sent to the asylum, and whose unhappy fate was kept a secret from her friends, hoping she would some day recover her reason fully."

"Then you believe, Colonel Barrett, that the girl who pretended to be Miss Belle Braddock, here at the fort, was the one you refer to as your ward's rival?"

"Yes, Surgeon Powell."

"And that she is in league with this Mexican, Monte Miranda, to get possession of Miss Hembold for some deep purpose of their own?"

"It seems so to me, I confess, Surgeon Powell."

"Then our unknown friend is on the right track, sir?"

"I deem him so, and all I can do to aid you in the rescue of Miss Hembold I will gladly do."

"If this is the woman I suspect her to be—Cleo Amidon was her name—then I would like to see her captured and made to suffer, for her cruel treatment of an innocent, noble girl."

"And if she is leagued with outlaws, Colonel Barrett, she must suffer the consequences," sternly declared Frank Powell.

After some further conversation upon the subject, it was decided that Buffalo Bill should pick six men from his scouts, with Captain Jack Crawford, Wild Bill and Texas Jack as his special allies, while Surgeon Frank Powell should go with Captain Alf Taylor, Lieutenant Ames and thirty picked troopers, to patrol the mountains, trails and mines, and be within easy call when needed.

And Cody and his men, and the three officers of the patrol troop, were to wear the Crimson Stars of the Secret League.

CHAPTER XV.

A CHIP OF THE OLD BLOCK.

A HACIENDA, so strong that it looked more like a fort, or barrack, than a gentleman's home, stood in a wild and secluded part of the mountains in Mexico, not very many miles from the Rio Grande.

If the hacienda estate brought more than enough to furnish the table of the owner, and feed his servants and horses, it had not the appearance of doing so, for upon every hand there

was an air of neglect. The fields were weed-grown, the roads unworked, and upon all rested a general look of desolation and decay.

Peon servants were seen about the place, with half a dozen Mexican *vaqueros* looking after a few hundred head of cattle and a herd of ponies.

Within, the place looked comfortable, and there were signs of former riches and grandeur upon all sides.

Seated in a spacious and luxurious library, with bedroom and dining-room adjoining, was the lord and master of the domain.

His face showed good Spanish blood, and though he looked like a man given to dissipation, yet refinement was stamped upon his features.

He was near fifty years of age, and his hair and mustache were gray, but his eyes were bright and piercing.

Don Miranda had once, been a man of vast wealth, and had stood well in his country, but he had been the slave of the gaming-table, and his fortune had fled from him, forcing him to retire to his mountain hacienda to escape creditors and the cuts of his former friends.

Many of his acts to get money had been so close to stealing that he knew if he remained longer in the city of Mexico he would terminate his years in prison, so he exiled himself to his hacienda, which at least gave him a living.

Dark stories were whispered as to his being in league with certain Mexican outlaws, but upon this score he was at least not troubled, and the army officers always found a hospitable welcome in his home.

The Don's son had been a brilliant youth, had won distinction as a soldier before he was twenty, and then had followed the bent of his humor, which led him in his father's footsteps of dissipation and card-playing.

Such a career could end in but one way, and Monte Miranda, the handsome captain of Lanceros, the admired of beautiful señoritas, eventually found himself a fugitive from his home.

Going to the United States, his career there soon made him a fugitive from justice, and he fled West to become a Mormon and then an outlaw.

As Don Miranda now sat in his pleasant library, enjoying his wine, and congratulating himself that his cellar was able to furnish plenty more for his enjoyment, a visitor was announced.

The Don was suspicious of visitors whom he did not know, and so asked the peon servant who he was.

"An army officer, señor, I think."

The Don was fond of company and army officers were his friends, for it suited their convenience to be so in the mountains, though in the city they would have cut him dead had he spoken to them.

A tall man entered, cloaked and heavily bearded, and calmly took the seat to which the Don motioned.

"Don Miranda," said the stranger, when the servant had disappeared from the room, "I represent the Mexican Government, and am here as the chief of the Junta's Secret-Service men."

Don Miranda flushed and paled. At last the blow had fallen, and he was to be arrested and imprisoned for various acts he had been guilty of, from forging the names of former friends to cheating at cards.

"Why have you called upon me, señor, may I ask?" he demanded with well-assumed indignation after a pause.

"I will tell you, señor, that, as the new chief, I determined to look into the past careers of certain men, and I found that you, though nothing wrong had been charged against you by the Government, had been guilty of certain acts which would send you to prison for life—yes, perhaps cause you to be sentenced to death."

"To death?" gasped the Don.

"Yes, for in aiding your son to escape from prison, you took the life of a guard."

"No! no! I did not kill him. It was my son who did the deed!" cried the old man excitedly.

"It was not known that you aided him; but I sifted the matter and discovered who was the guilty one."

"I say my son killed him."

"Yes, but your son is a fugitive from Mexico and is not likely to come back and testify against himself to save his father, so you will have to suffer the penalty of the crime, be you innocent or guilty."

The manner of the visitor was decisive and threatening, and the Don was almost prostrated with horror and distress.

As he attempted to rise from his seat, the visitor said:

"Don Miranda, you are my prisoner, and must return with me to the City of Mexico this night."

"Man! man! tell me if other than you know of these charges against me?" appealed the Don.

"Not a soul."

"My friend, I am not rich, but I am getting old and do not wish to die in prison, perhaps worse—go to the gallows, for no mercy would be shown me, so I will give you one half the gold I have laid by, if you will spare me!"

"I need money, and I do not wish you to suffer through me, so name your sum for my silence."

"Three thousand pesos."

"Say five thousand and I accept."

"I will, though it will take my all," and the Don hastily went to his iron safe in the wall and counted out the money with trembling fingers.

The visitor coolly pocketed it, then dropped into a chair and said:

"Thank you, father! It was my only chance to get money out of you," and the speaker threw off a false beard and wig, revealing to the now furious Don the features of his evil son.

CHAPTER XVI.

TO GAIN AN INHERITANCE.

THE man disclosed, when cloak, wig and beard were cast aside, was that of one whose years could not have numbered twenty-five, yet whose face was so indelibly stamped with dissipation and vice it looked far older.

A handsome, dark face it was, with eyes that could hide their evil expression at will, and look tender and winning, while the hard lines of the mouth could soften to deceive, but every feature wore its stamp of wickedness if not disguised from a humor to do so.

The form was elegant, and the man was dressed well.

That his having unmasked himself after his frightening him as he had done, rendered the Don furious, one glance into his face was enough to discover, for it was livid, while his eyes flashed like a wild beast's in fury.

Unheeding his father's anger, Monte Miranda took a seat and laughed heartily until he caught sight of the face of the Don.

This checked his mirth, and he said, coaxingly:

"Come, father, don't be angry with me for the little joke I played upon you, as how else could I have gotten a loan?"

"Boy, do you mean that you intend to rob me of my gold?" hissed the Don.

"Oh, no, only borrow it, Don."

"You have robbed me of my all, for I have no more money or resources."

"Pardon me, señor, but I observed that you kept back the lion's share when you handed me this gold and these bank-notes."

"I needed money, and there was but one way to get it."

"And that was to rob your old father."

"I have borrowed it only, for some day you will get it all back."

"So you have said a hundred times, degenerate boy."

"But some day has not come yet, and I mean what I say."

"You got money from me before when you were here, upon the condition that you were to find your cousin."

"I found her."

"Where?" eagerly asked the old Mexican.

"Dwelling with her father at a frontier fort."

"Well?"

"I kidnapped her."

"Yes, yes!"

"I had every reason for believing I could force her to marry me, while she was in my retreat; but she is a perfect spitfire, and told me plainly she would rather die than become my wife. So I was waiting until I could bring her to terms, when an accident happened that spoiled all."

"What was it?"

"Well, I simply got caught by Buffalo Bill and his scouts, and only the most skillful lying and nerve combined saved me from being hanged."

"You deserved it."

"Certainly, as my father does for his acts in the past; and more, he must think so, too, or he would never have been frightened into paying me five thousand pesos for silence," and the young sinner laughed heartily.

The Don's face flushed with anger, and he said sharply:

"To your story, boy."

"Well, señor, I managed to escape by my nerve, and just in time, for the outlaws' retreat was raided that night, my sweet cousin was rescued, and I barely saved myself from being retaken."

"As it was, I had to make for Salt Lake City and remain there for a while, after which I began to visit the camps and gamble a little."

"Luck went against me, and finding myself down in New Mexico, dead broke, I concluded to come home and get some money from you."

"You'll not get it."

"Pardon me, but I have all I care for just now."

"You will not take that money from me!"

"Of course I will."

"I'll denounce you, and you'll hang for it."

"Yes, and I'll have company, for my father will hang with me."

"Boy, you cannot frighten me."

"That I can. I did so a while since, and right here I have the result of your alarm."

"Now I needed money to return and again get possession of Cousin Heloise Hembold."

"She'll not marry you."

"I'll tell her the exact situation, that her mother's father left his inheritance to her upon condition that she becomes my wife, and then we share it equally."

"He did not know you to be the scapegrace you are."

"Thank you for not putting it stronger; but I shall tell her the alternative if she does not wed me and return to Mexico as my wife."

"She will lose her fortune you mean."

"I mean that she will lose her life, and when I bring proof of her death, then I get the fortune anyway, for so reads the will."

"Well, do as you deem best, you villain; but not a dollar more do you get from me."

"I do not expect to; but I will be kind and promise to help you, for with that large inheritance I can buy silence and law in Mexico, and people will pretend to honor me if they do not really do so."

"But this country is no healthy place for me just now, so after you have ordered a good supper brought in, with some of your rare old wines, I will remove my hateful self from your presence, Don."

"I will order supper if you will put on your disguise again."

"Of course, for I have no desire to be recognized."

"And you will give me back half that money, my son?"

"Not a peso, Don, for I need it all."

"It is robbery."

"Then the tables have merely been turned upon you, señor."

"Where do you go from here?"

"The trail I take I will not tell you, as I have no desire to be ambushed, and besides, the Government has a price set upon my head, which you might fall heir to, if you cut me off in my usefulness."

"You know better than to suspect me of such a crime."

"No, I trust no man; but I don't mind telling you that this money will enable me to go to Salt Lake City and lay my plans to get my smart cousin into my power."

"Now order supper, Don, and then I will leave you."

The Don obeyed, and after he had eaten heartily the young man nodded to his father pleasantly and left the hacienda.

CHAPTER XVII.

A MAN'S SACRIFICE.

ALONG the Overland Trail, running between San Francisco and Salt Lake City, a coach was rolling at a rapid gait, for the way was good traveling and a relay of horses had been taken a few miles back.

The driver handled his team well and was very watchful, for he knew that dangers lurked along the trails, if not for himself, for the passengers he carried.

Within the coach, four passengers, one of whom was, apparently, a young girl, though her face was so heavily veiled as to hide her features; but her form was slender and graceful, her gloved hands small and shapely, and one would guess from her general appearance that she was both youthful and beautiful.

She had seemed a bit nervous on the way, careful to hide her face, and had not been inclined to conversation.

The one who sat by her side was a man whose appearance indicated that he was a lucky winner returning home.

He was dressed in a new suit of broadcloth, slouch hat, and wore a full beard.

All his overtures to enter into conversation with his seat companion and the one who sat opposite to him had been unavailing.

The person facing him was a young man, with black hair and beard, splendid eyes and the air of a gentleman, though a foreigner.

He was well dressed in what appeared to be a fatigue uniform of the Mexican Army.

There was a fourth person in the stage in the person of a rough-looking miner.

Suddenly the stage came to a halt as a loud command to halt was heard, and the driver called out from the box:

"Pilgrims, ther road-agents has got us, and ther is too many ter fool with yer guns hoping to skeer 'em."

The three men quickly glanced from the coach, while the lady passenger uttered a slight cry of alarm.

"Have no fear, miss, for they will hardly harm or rob a lady," the young man urged, with a slight accent in his speech.

"These devils show no favor, and we are all in for it," the sleek-looking miner remarked.

The third man merely said, gruffly:

"If they kin git any dust out of my purse it's more'n I kin do."

"Have you much that is valuable with you, miss?" asked the Mexican, politely.

"Yes, all that I have, my jewels and several thousands in money," was the reply.

The well-dressed miner smiled and looked pleased.

"I thought so!" was his mental comment.

The chief of the road-agents now rode up to the window of the coach, while two of his men stood guard upon the other side.

"No use, pard. Thar is half a dozen more of 'em," called out the driver.

"Well, you all know what I want—your money or your lives, so let it be what you least value," called out the outlaw chief.

"There is my pile, and I'll keep my life," was the well-dressed miner's response, tossing over a well-filled purse.

"I has got a stake for a game, when I reaches camp, and no more; but if yer says yer must have it, thar it be," and the rough-dressed miner handed over ten dollars.

"I want money, not pocket-change."

"Come, sir, what have you got to contribute?"

"A couple of hundreds, sir, besides a bill of exchange which is of no use to you."

"I'll rake the cash."

The Mexican handed it over, and then the chief said:

"Now, miss, you looks like a bird of pretty fine plumage, so what do you pay me?"

"If you rob me, sir, I am utterly destitute, so I beg of you to spare my money."

"Not I, for you can get more, and are doubtless an heiress to a fortune, or are some millionaire's wife, so I guess I'll hold you for ransom, my lady."

"Say, my man, I am able to pay a ransom, and if you will take me with you and spare the lady, I will readily go."

It was the Mexican who spoke.

"I'll kill you, you know, if you can't get your ransom money."

"So be it; I will take her place."

The road-agent looked into the face of the Mexican earnestly for a minute, and then remarked:

"I'll take you on those terms, pard."

"Oh, sir, do not go with him!" cried the lady passenger, and in her excitement she raised her veil, revealing a youthful face and one of wondrous beauty.

The Mexican glanced at her an instant, and responded gallantly:

"I accept the situation for your sake, fair lady."

Then he sprung from the coach, and two of the outlaws on foot seized him.

What he said to them was not heard by those in the coach, but one of them instantly left him and called his chief aside, whispering something to him.

The chief returned and looked at the well-dressed miner, while he said:

"You are deceiving me, sir."

"How so?"

"You are Harry Hawk, the 'Frisco detective, and you have plenty more with you—Hal take that!" and the chief fired full in his face, as the detective attempted to draw a revolver.

With a groan he fell forward, and he was dragged from the stage.

"You see I am in earnest, miss, but as I have a hostage who will pay well for you, I'll permit you to go; while, as for you, I believe you have nothing worth taking," and he looked at the rough-clad miner, who took the situation with the air of one who had nothing to lose but his life.

"Thank you for nothin', pard," was the answer.

"Oh, sir, I'll give you my jewelry, yes, and my money, if you will release that gentleman!" pleaded the maiden.

The chief glanced over toward the Mexican, and then said slowly:

"No, I'll make more out of him; but if he deceives me, he dies."

"Driver, I'll bury Detective Hawk, and you can tell it along the trail how he met his death."

"Go!"

The driver needed no second bidding, and as the coach rolled out of sight around a bend in the trail, the chief sprung from his horse and grasping the hand of his prisoner cried delightedly:

"Lieutenant Monte, I am delighted to meet you again."

"Yes, and let me tell you that on the body of Detective Hawk you will find five thousand dollars in clean bank-notes," was the response of Monte Miranda, for he it was.

CHAPTER XVIII.

ALLIES IN CRIME.

"WELL, Lieutenant Monte, it really does my eyes good to see you," said the road-agent leader, as, after taking the money from the dead detective he turned again and greeted Miranda, for Monte Miranda the "hostage" really was.

"Yes, Rockwell, and the money you get through the tip I gave you of Harry Hawk also is good for your eyes, and more than compensates for the woman's little purse."

"I have an idea that she had a large sum with her, Mr. Monte."

"You are wrong, for she is my ally, though we are traveling as though unknown to each other."

"Ah, I see, sir."

"Yes, and I am eastward-bound. Rockwell,

to again get a lot of the old Toll-Takers together, for I have some big paying schemes on hand which I can put through with help."

"You needn't look far, Señor Monte, for I have five of the old boys with me, and three others I have picked up on the trails, so we are nine all told, at your service all of us."

"Thank you, Rockwell, but when I played second fiddle to Major Mephisto in the old band, I would not be content to do so now, for I must conduct my plots in my own way."

"I recognized you and several of your men at a glance, so made myself known. I knew you would not rob my ally, the young lady, for old friendship's sake for me."

"No, lieutenant; and more: I'll prove my friendship by making you captain, while I take second place."

"I know your pluck, and that you have got a better head than I have to plot and plan, and I am willing to shift the responsibility, if you'll take it upon your shoulders."

This was just what the Mexican was after, but he did not wish to seem too anxious, so said:

"I'll tell you, Rockwell, I have, as I said some big schemes on hand that will make my men rich with myself, and I do not care to operate in this country, but down upon an old ground, near the border-line of outposts, mines and settlements."

"We can go there, señor."

"Very well, I will take command, and you can work your way there with the men, back to the old retreat."

"I'll get a horse from you, pretend to have escaped, and go on after the coach, catching it before it reaches Salt Lake, and you can bury that body and then hunt your retreat with your men."

"But do not remain long, for the killing of Harry Hawk will bring the Vigilantes upon you sure."

"Make your way eastward by roundabout trails, and lose no time in getting away, while you must cover up your tracks fully."

"I know you, and am glad to have you with me, and before long they shall know on the border that Mephisto's ghost is on the trails with a phantom band."

"A good idea, captain, for I will call you so now, and we will tell the men what I have decided upon."

"All right, but just let me have a thousand of that money you took from Hawk, for I was shadowing him to get it all."

"He was watching the body, and a gentleman back on the trail gave him this money to carry through for him and Express East after he got to Salt Lake, so I don't mind letting you have the four thousand and spare change, you know, with his watch and chain."

"All right, Captain Monte," said the outlaw Rockwell, and the sum of one thousand dollars was counted and handed over.

The body of the detective was then buried, and calling his men together Rockwell introduced Monte as his old chief, and stated that he would yield the leadership of the band to him.

Those among the men who remembered Monte, as Major Mephisto's lieutenant, at once acquiesced, for they knew him to be a dashing leader, where Rockwell was, though a brave man, very cautious, and often allowed good chances for gain to slip through his fingers.

"Men, I have my plans all laid for work, and I will make your pockets heavy with gold, I promise you," said the newly-appointed captain, and soon after, having had another conversation with Rockwell, he mounted the latter's own horse and rode away in pursuit of the stage.

The coach had by this time gained a couple of hours' start, for the driver, Harkaway, had lost no time after leaving the road-agents, but pushed his team hard, in spite of the trail he was following.

He had been struck with admiration at the apparent sacrifice of the young Mexican, in offering himself to save the young girl, and was anxious to warn the Mormon Patrol of the Mexican's being taken prisoner, hoping by prompt action he could be rescued.

It would be sunset before he reached the little mountain hamlet where the Mormon Patrol of the trails had their retreat, but he meant to drive for all his team was worth.

The coach swayed wildly at times, but Harkaway explained to the lady passenger his cause of haste and she made no complaint.

As for the miner on the front seat, he took the situation as coolly as before, except uttering a muttered growl now and then, when a leap of the coach would bring his head in contact with the top.

Mounted upon Rockwell's fleet horse, for the animal was a fine one, very fast and sure-footed, Monte, the Mexican, went three miles to one of the coach, and, after a ride of several hours, halted at a stream for water. Then he heard the distant rumbling of the wheels over the rocky trail.

Just as his horse held his head up after drinking, Monte, the Mexican, heard the stern command from some one unseen:

"Hands up, pard, for you are covered to kill!"

CHAPTER XIX.

THE PRETTY FUGITIVE.

MEXICAN MONTE was too well acquainted with border warfare, to take chances when the odds were all against him.

He did not see his foes, for they were thoroughly ambushed, and another voice than the one who had startled him with the command to hold up his hands, told him there were more than one against him.

His horse was knee-deep in the brook, and to dash forward and up the steep hill before him would bring him under fire of he knew not how many weapons.

To turn about and fly would be equally as bad a proceeding.

So he quietly held his hands over his head and called out:

"All right, pards, what is the demand upon you?"

Then out from behind the bowlders on each side of the trail stepped half a dozen men, and more appeared leading the horses of the party.

"Mormons!" muttered the Mexican quietly, and then the leader said:

"So we have you, my fine fellow."

"So it appears, pard."

"And you were chasing the coach?"

"Just what I was doing."

"So you are a self-confessed road-agent?"

"Who says so?"

"You just admitted it."

"Look here, pard, your head is turned, for I admitted nothing of the kind."

"You said you were chasing the coach?"

"So I was, and I am anxious to overtake it."

"To rob the passengers?"

"You are a fool, for I have just escaped from Rockwell's Rangers, having been a passenger in the coach, and am hastening to catch up with it."

"This is your story."

"Were you here when the coach passed?"

"No, we got here just after it went by, heard you coming, so sprung to cover and ambushed you."

"Well, come on with me after the coach and I'll prove my words."

"No, we only give road-agents fifteen minutes to live after capturing them, and we will make no exception in your case."

"You are Rockwell himself, for we know his horse and Mexican trappings well."

"You are as silly a pack of fools as I ever saw, pards, and I wonder the Prophet allows you to go loose."

"You recognize us, then?"

"Yes, you are Mormons."

"We are the Mormon Minute Men."

"Yes, the Patrol, and I shall report how utterly devoid of reason you are where common sense is in demand."

"You will report it?"

"Yes."

"You won't live to make any report."

The answer of the Mexican to this was to suddenly raise his hands over his head, the palms toward the Mormons, and then bringing them together clasp them firmly, while he said in a stern, distinct voice:

"Nauvoo!"

The effect was electrical upon the Mormons, for they started, raised their left hand to their forehead, shielding their eyes and stood in silence.

"Shall I give you other proof that I am a Danite captain, men?" asked the Mexican coolly.

"None, chief, we are satisfied," said the one who had before spoken, and he added:

"We humbly crave mercy and forgiveness from you, chief."

"Granted, but be more careful in future not be over-hasty."

"I was, as I said, a passenger in Harkaway's coach, but held for ransom by the road-agents, I escaped and rode hard to overtake the stage."

"Come with me, for Harkaway may be able to give you valuable information about these outlaws."

The Mormon Patrol obeyed, but the Mexican no longer rode at the break-neck pace he had before.

He was anxious to get the Patrol well away from Rockwell and his men, giving the latter ample time to escape, for he knew the Mormons were splendid trailers and daring fighters.

At the station settlement they arrived just as Harkaway was preparing to depart, and a cheer broke from the driver's lips as he saw the Mexican appear on Rockwell's horse.

The story of his alleged escape was quickly told, and then he said he would hitch the outlaw's horse behind the coach, to lead, while he rode on.

Then the Patrol started on the back trail after the outlaws, but the Mexican knew night would come on before they reached the scene and he felt no anxiety for Rockwell and his men.

The miner left the coach at the station, so that Monte Miranda found himself alone with the beautiful lady passenger.

Her veil was raised now and she looked very beautiful as her face was flushed in expressing her gratitude.

The Mexican listened calmly and then said, as

he glanced over some papers he had taken from the body of the dead detective:

"I am more than glad to have served you, Miss Amidon."

The maiden uttered a slight cry and her face paled, while she said tremulously:

"You know me, then?"

"I wish to tell you that I have served you more than you know, for the man who was killed by the outlaws was Harry Hawk the detective."

"He had papers with him for the arrest of a young girl by the name of Cleo Amidon, who was a fugitive from California for having most skillfully robbed a jewelry firm by drugging the head clerk who visited her, taking his keys and going by night to the store."

"She secured a snug sum of money, and some jewels, but unable to open the inner combination of the safe, she failed to secure the very large sum she had anticipated."

"The clerk did not betray her, but went to prison as the guilty one, while Hawk took the case from suspicions he formed and was on the right track when, through me, he was killed, and you were not taken back to Frisco, my dear Miss Amidon, so can still continue your way and turn Mormon, as was your intention I believe, from what Hawk's notes here state."

"I alone know your secret, and to prove to you that I will keep it, let me tell you that I am a Mormon Danite."

"I am, in fact, a Danite captain, though my personal duties have called me away of late."

"Now I am going to Salt Lake to renew my allegiance, and by paying my past fees due, with a bonus, I will be reinstated, for what shortcomings I may have been guilty of are not known to the Prophet."

"What my plans for the future are, I will eventually confess to you, for you are a woman after my own heart, bold, daring, beautiful and clever."

"I will form a compact with you, and if kept to the letter by you, it will enrich us both."

"Now, my beautiful fugitive from justice, what do you say to becoming the ally for good or evil life or death, of Mexican Monte, the Danite captain and adventurer?"

The woman had listened to his quietly-told story of herself with a face that revealed her conflicting emotions.

Never before had she been so influenced, and, drawn toward the daring villain by his pretended sacrifice for her sake, she had become, as it were, under a spell.

He knew her as she was, had saved her, and when he asked her to ally herself with him, she held forth her hand without a word and said firmly:

"Until death us do part."

CHAPTER XX.

THE DANITE'S BRIDE.

WHATEVER argument it was that Monte Miranda used, with those in authority in Salt Lake City, as to his wishing to again enter the fold, is not known, but certain it is that it was successful.

Of course he used deception, and the prophet was won over into allowing him to go upon some secret and special mission, which those who professed to know was none other than to capture the outlaws who hung upon the mountain trails and did inestimable harm to Mormon and Gentile alike.

The secret of his working out this desirable end Mexican Monte kept to himself, but he left Salt Lake City a week after his arrival, and it was with the air of one who had authority.

Nor did he go alone, for he was accompanied by a youth whom he addressed as "Pat," and who was mounted upon a very beautiful snow-white mare.

The Mexican rode the horse which he had ridden away from the scene of the halting of the stage-coach, and he was leading two other horses fairly loaded down with packs, so that their progress was slow.

They camped early, and while the Mexican built a fire and looked to the horses, and preparing shelter, Pat took from one of the pack-saddles some cooking utensils and provisions and began to prepare supper.

The meal was eaten with considerable relish by the man, while the youth hardly tasted his supper, and at last Monte said:

"What is the matter, Pat?"

"Monte, I will tell you," came vehemently from the youth's lips.

"I shall be glad to hear," the man said, dryly.

"Until I saw you I did not know what it was to love, though of course I had had my fancies."

"But I was born poor, so I was accursed, as poverty is a crime."

"I was well educated, and placed at school with rich girls, so was made to feel my poverty all the time."

"Then it was that I vowed I would make my beauty win me riches."

"So I took heart out of the question, and determined to triumph."

"My being poor warped my nature, as well as because I was lowly born, and I hated all aristocrats and people of wealth."

"My father was a Mormon, and my mother

ran away from Salt Lake when he died, with only a few thousands to support herself and me on.

"She worked hard for a living and spent the money educating me, and then died suddenly, leaving me almost destitute.

"Then it was I began to plot for riches, and I determined to get them at all costs.

"I could have married a hundred times over, but was determined to wed only a millionaire.

"To go East and win such a husband I played my cards to rob that jewelry store, and though successfully carried out it brought me but a few thousands.

"Still, fear of the man who had me in his power, for I confess he was only *drugged*, where I meant he should die of the poison, for self-preservation is Nature's first law, made me start East with what I had.

"I intended stopping in Salt Lake City to see what I could find there, and so met you.

"Your face won me and I wished to speak with you, but kept silent.

"Then came the road-agents demanding my money and you offering yourself, and I loved you.

"You told me that you were a wicked man, yet I changed not my opinion, and so, led by you, I forgot all my resolves and became your wife.

"Now you tell me that I am to go into the wilds where you are to become the chief of a band of road-agents, and blindly have I followed you, obeying your command to dress as a boy.

"You said that it would gain for us vast riches and I came, willing to obey your bidding, but, Monte, just before we halted for our camp to-night, you told me that your purpose was to get into your possession a young and beautiful girl, the daughter of an American army officer, so now I ask you why do you wish to capture this woman, when I am *your wife*?"

The Mexican laughed lightly and said:

"You jealous little woman, now I see what ails you.

"But to explain, I will say that in the possession of this girl lies our future fortune, and a large one it is.

"Once we possess it and we can go where we will and enjoy it, Cleopatra, my beautiful wife.

"Do you not understand?"

"Why should your capture of this girl bring you fortune, Monte?"

"I see I will have to tell you the whole story, *cara mia*.

"You see she is my first cousin."

"First cousins are dangerous companions, Monte?"

"Listen to my story, Cleo, for all perhaps it will be best, after we arrive at the retreat for you to resume your feminine garb, so I'll stop calling you Pat.

"You see the girl's mother was a Mexican, and she ran off and married an American officer, so her father would not give her a *peso*.

"But, that her child should be forced to marry a Mexican, he made his will leaving his large fortune to the girl I refer to on condition that she should become my wife."

"Your wife?" and the woman started.

"Yes, and unless she did wed me neither of us should have a *peso*.

"If I died, or she died, then the survivor would get the inheritance, you see.

"I have tried to win the girl, I admit, since she was at boarding-school, but she never liked me."

"How strange."

"But true, though it was not for herself I sought her, but for the money.

"I visited her at the fort, when her father was away and again sought to win her, but was refused.

"Then I determined to force her to marry me, so kidnapped her.

"She was rescued from me, and I almost gave it up, but at length determined to try again."

"And you expect my aid in this?"

"Of course, for remember, Cleo, you are my wife, and if I can show a certificate of my marriage to her, and another of her death, signed by a man who was once surgeon of the outlaws, but who is practicing medicine in a town on the Overland, that *she died*, why I can go to Mexico and claim the inheritance.

"To kidnap her you can help me, and unless she is willing to sign this certificate of our marriage, why then she must let me get the fortune in the only other way I can."

"By her death, you mean?"

"Yes."

"I will help you, Monte," was the reply, and the shadow faded from the beautiful face of the woman, whose heart was wicked and cruel.

The next day they continued on their way to the old retreat of the Toll-Takers, and where Monte Miranda expected to find Rockwell and his outlaw band awaiting him.

CHAPTER XXI.

AN ODD MINING-CAMP.

It was an odd community that dwelt in the mining-camp, which some facetious miner who

had struck it rich, had given the name of Glory Hallelujah City.

The element dwelling there, and in the vicinity, which meant a group of mining-camps in the valley, were as wild as untamed steers, and yet just as easily managed as steers by a master.

They knew their master, too, when he came, and submitted with the good grace of border-men who knew when to hold up their hands and when to draw trigger.

The mines panned out fairly well, there were several stores well patronized, a few shanties known as "hotels," and one more pretentious building which was called Kate's Kitchen.

This name was given it by the miners on account of its having a landlady instead of a landlord.

The landlord had prospered there, until one day the stage-coach on the Overland, which had Hallelujah City as the terminus on a branch trail, brought to the tavern a supposed youth, who went to the room of the proprietor.

No one knew just what happened there, but a pistol-shot was heard, a fall followed, and the "boy" proved to be a beautiful woman who claimed the landlord as her husband.

He being dead, could neither deny or affirm the allegation, and Kate Fenwick at once became installed as Landlord Frank Fenwick's successor.

And a good successor she proved to be, for Kate's Kitchen became famous as a place to get a clean bed and square meal.

There was one other female in Hallelujah City, and she had arrived there with her husband, Gambler Gray, who kept the "boss" saloon of the camps, which, in honor of his wife he had named the "Queen of Hearts."

Gambler Gray met more than his match one day and left his memory, his saloon and his fortune to his widow, who was, by a strange coincidence, equally as handsome a woman as was the widow of the late Landlord Fenwick.

Lou Gray soon became known as Gambler Lou, while with the marked courtesy of the miners, both she and Kate were given the title of "Lady" before their Christian appellations, and were spoken of from one end of the valley to the other as "Lady Lou" and "Lady Kate."

There were other strange characters in Hallelujah City, but they were masculine, and the community boasted of Americans, Mexicans, Canadians, Mormons, Indians and half-breeds, with a sprinkling of Irish, German, Chinese and negroes.

Mining, horse-racing, gambling and drinking were the principal pastimes, and the American element made itself most strongly felt.

There were quiet men there and boisterous ones, bravos and desperadoes, and altogether men who lived with their lives in their hands.

The law of the "quickest to draw" was what ruled, and almost daily some poor unfortunate was sent to the burying-ground, in which hardly a man slept his last breath who had not "died with his boots on."

Strange was it then that these two young and beautiful women had found a home there, and stranger still it was that every man there, however rough and wild, considered them his own particular ward to protect.

Loving unworthily, the old cry, had been Lou Gray's reason for following her reckless gambler husband to the mines, and to avenge herself perhaps upon a villain husband, had brought Kate Fenwick there, or at least so it seemed.

There were a few men in Hallelujah City who "ruled the roost," and were acknowledged "king bees."

Many of the older set of miners often sighed, when seeing these desperadoes putting on airs, that a certain unknown and most mysterious personage who had once made Hallelujah City his abiding-place was no longer there.

This Man of Mystery had come unannounced, and had quickly made himself felt.

He allowed no man to be harmed by a strong one, and when trouble came met it in a way that thinned the camps of the desperadoes.

No one knew him other than that he dressed in deep black broadcloth, wore a sable sombrero, had a calm, beardless, handsome face, and looked like a bishop rather than one ready to face death at the revolver muzzle.

He rode black horses, and superb animals they were, dwelt alone in a cabin on a mountain spur a couple of miles from the camps, and came and went at his will.

The miners had not been long in naming this very remarkable man, and they had bestowed upon him several titles, such as Bandbox Bill, the Bravo in Broadcloth, and the Man in Black.

As mysteriously as he had come, after viewing the camps well in his quiet way, he departed, and when it was known that he had really departed from Hallelujah City, the worst element of the mines began to rise to the surface again, and a reign of terror was often the result.

This was what made the better ones among the miners sigh for the going of the Man in Black.

They longed to see him come again and crush

out the wild desperado element as he had before done.

That another like him could be found they did not believe, and so very reckless were the roughs becoming that Gambler Lou and Lady Kate began to hasten their arrangements for taking their departure for more congenial scenes.

They were coining money, so to speak, in Hallelujah City, and had to their credit in Eastern banks snug fortunes; but they were anxious to get more, so that the wolf of poverty would never come near their door.

But they were beginning to feel that the camps were becoming too wild for them, and they were thinking of doing as the Bravo in Broadcloth had urged them to do—leave.

Such was the mining-camp known as Glory Hallelujah City, at the time the Toll-Takers of the trails were revived and the band began their robberies upon the Overland.

The wiping out of the outlaw band something over a year before, had given peace for awhile on the trails, and it was startling news to the miners to learn that Keen Kit, the most popular driver of the Overland, had been held up, and his passengers robbed.

They had promptly sent a Vigilante Committee out to capture and hang the road-agents, and instead of victory met with dire defeat at the hands of the outlaws.

This convinced the miners that it would be best to leave the punishment of the Toll-Takers to Government troops, and they did; but the depredations still continued and one afternoon the coach rolled in with a stranger on the box and holding the reins and Keen Kit seated by his side with his arm in a sling.

The stranger was a most striking-looking individual, and he wrote his name on the hotel books as

"JACK OVERTON—Gentleman."

CHAPTER XXII.

A STRANGER BARS THE WAY.

KIT KEEN, or as border nomenclature had metamorphosed the name, Keen Kit, was a driver of the Overland whose only foes were road-agents and desperadoes.

He would give his last dollar to one in need, and never turned back on friend or foe, while in spite of his big heart and genial nature he would fight anything from a man to a grizzly if there was need for it.

He hated road-agents as he did a snake, and was wont to plot and plan to circumvent them and prevent his passengers from being robbed.

Keen Kit also enjoyed the name of Old Owl. Eyes, as it was said that he could see in the dark like a cat.

Certainly he did drive the trails when all was as black as ink about him, and he was a man to take big chances.

His team knew him perfectly, and when anything was wrong ahead on a dark night, the leaders were wont to give him prompt notice.

A number of drivers had been put on the Hallelujah branch of the Overland, but not one had made the success that Keen Kit had as a prince of the reins.

Twice of late Keen Kit had met with misfortunes on his run, for the road-agents had held him up and gotten a snug sum out of the passengers he carried.

They were too many to fight, for seven men were wont to appear, six on foot and one mounted, and unless it was a coach full of soldiers resistance appeared to be madness and could end but one way.

Keen Kit was therefore in no good humor at finding that, after a long respite, the Toll-Takers were again upon the Overland Trails.

But on this run, when he is presented to the reader, he was congratulating himself over and over again that he had no "pilgrims" on board, for so he called passengers.

"They'll find the old huss empty and then take it out in cussin' me."

"But I guesses I kin stand it, for I has been swore at that much it do seem ther same ter me as pourin' water on a duck's back."

"Lordy! but how they will profanitize and won't I be tickled?" and Keen Kit laughed as he drove along with his empty coach.

After awhile he resumed:

"I kinder feel it in my bones thet road-agints is about, this trip."

"Waal, let 'em be, for what hev they ter git out o' me?"

"Yer can't squeeze water out o' a dry sponge, and thet same do apply ter me on this run."

"I hain't got dust enough ter chip in fer a liberal game o' poker ter-night when I puts up in Hallelujah City and drops into ther Queen o' Hearts Saloon, arter I has had a good feed at Kate's Kitchen."

So did Keen Kit commune aloud with himself as he drove along, and though he knew that the road-agents, in sheer devilry at their disappointment at finding no passengers, might kill him, it did not make him at all nervous.

He was a fearless man and ready to die at the post of duty if need be.

Suddenly the leaders pricked up their ears and one of them gave a low neigh.

Keen Kit had named his horses after his

favorite drinks, for the leaders were Gin and Bitters, the next pair Tom and Jerry, and the wheelers Rum and Molasses.

"Ah, there, Bitters, you scent a road-agent or a grizzly do you—which is it?" he said, as though acknowledging to the horse which had neighed that he thanked him for the signal given him of danger ahead.

Some overhanging branches prevented Kit from getting a good view of the trail ahead, which his horses could see; but a moment after the driver beheld a man standing in his way.

"I'm in fer it," he muttered, and yet he did not draw rein in the slightest.

"Waal, he are a dandy," he muttered, as he took in the general appearance of the one who barred his way.

He stood as upright as a soldier on parade, and his form was above the medium height, his shoulders very broad, and he looked like a grand full life-size portrait against the background of the dark green foliage.

The stranger wore a full beard, reaching almost to his waist, and his brown hair, a shade darker, fell in waving manes below his square expansive shoulders.

His attire seemed out of place for a man on foot and in a border trail, for he wore white corduroy pants, stuck in high top-boots, a velvet jacket with slashed sleeves fringed with gold buttons, a white silk shirt with broad collar, black scarf in which glittered a small but brilliant ruby star, and an embroidered belt supporting a pair of most serviceable revolvers and a long-bladed, ugly-looking knife for close quarters.

Upon his head was a sombrero of scarlet, which added greatly to his picturesque costume, as well as being very becoming to him.

At his back slung a repeating-rifle of a new pattern, and altogether the handsome, picturesque stranger looked as though he was gotten up for a *masque*, rather than for service on the frontier.

"Waal, I be darned fer a fool, ef I ever see ther beat o' thet gent for a git-up-and-dazzle-my-eyes look."

"A Poll-parrot hain't nowhere to him in feathers."

"I guesses he are ther head boss o' ther Toll-Takers."

"But he hain't alone on this trail, so I'll not drive over him, or holler ter skeer him, but let him have his way."

As Kit spoke the stranger raised his right hand.

The driver saw that it held no weapon, but that made no difference to him, as he felt that from an ambush other weapons covered him, so he obeyed the silent command and drew rein with the leaders within a few feet of the man who halted him so quickly.

"Waal, Dandy Pard, was yer out at a picnic last night and ther boys painted yer hat red fer yer?"

The stranger walked quickly to the side of the wheelers, and Kit saw that he wore a very handsome pair of spurs.

"You are Keen Kit?" he said, in a deep voice, in which there was a ring as though he was accustomed to command.

"Yas, pard, Keen Kit, Kit Keen, or old Owl Eyes as suits yer best."

"There is no one in your coach?"

"How does yer know that?"

"You admit it?"

"Yas, ther buss is empty, and my puss is empty, so that you has to credit me on toll this run, pard."

"What! you deem me a Toll-Taker?"

"I kinder has a idee yer is."

"Well, you are wrong, for my purpose is to aid you, not rob you."

"Yer don't mean it?"

"I do."

"Whar is yer gerloots?"

"I am alone."

"Hed I know'd that I'd a'treated yer ter a leetle lead medicine and pushed on over yer."

"I am glad you made no such effort, Keen Kit, for I am your friend and am here to serve you."

"Jist how?"

"Well, there are half a dozen Toll-Takers lying in wait for you down the trail a couple of miles from here."

"You, so they say, have a large sum of money for certain miners who sent dust through by you to get bank-bills for it."

"Lordy!"

"I overheard these fellows say that their spy reported the money to be concealed in lanterns, which have a hollow cup under the one for oil, and—"

"See here, pard, if you expects to git thet money without showing up more men yer is mistaken, for no one man kin rob me, and if yer doubts my word jist try it on," and quick as a flash Keen Kit had drawn and leveled his revolver full at the picturesque stranger.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE MUSIC OF A REVOLVER.

AT the sudden, and certainly unexpected act of the driver, Keen Kit, in drawing and leveling his revolver, the picturesque-looking stranger

showed not the slightest dread, nor did he make any motion to draw his weapon and precipitate a fire.

He smiled pleasantly, and said with no show of anger:

"My friend, you are on the wrong trail, for, as I told you, I am your friend."

"I am wandering about this country in quest of adventure, and I lay in ambush and heard the Toll-Takers plotting to hold up your coach and rob it."

"They had been informed in advance by a spy that you were to bring money through, knew the amount and its hiding-place, and more, were well aware that you were alone on the run."

The manner of the speaker was such that Kit lowered his revolver, and now that he had a good look at his face, he decided that, after all he might be wrong, so he said:

"What might your name be, dandy pard?"

"It might be almost anything, friend Kit, but I answer to that just now of Jack Over-ton."

"And your biz?"

"I am struggling with the profession of being a gentleman at large."

"Waal, yer looks it, and I has ter find out if yer acts it, for many a bad man is disguised as a gentleman."

The stranger laughed and replied:

"Very true, Kit; but let us talk business now, for time is precious."

"Waal, what are your biz with me?"

"The Toll-Takers are awaiting you down the trail, and they think you are alone."

"Yas."

"They have all things ready to get your money, and alone you can do nothing."

"I wilts when odds is too heavy, pard."

"Now, I propose to go as a passenger, in the rear boot of your coach."

"I see, said the blind man."

"You halt so as to keep your foes well ahead, and if they look into the stage, they will not into the boot, and when they think all is going their way I will just open on them."

"I'll take the men most dangerous to you at first, while you set your team going for all they are worth, and leave the rest to Jack Over-ton."

"Pard, you is a gent from 'Wayback, and I are proud ter know yer."

"Jist let me dismount and make yer comfortable back thar in ther boot, fer thar is one trunk yer kin use as a cheer, and ther kiver and straps must be fixed fer opening without no hitch, or you and me will both hand in our chips."

"Pard, yer is a dandy."

Kit sprung from the box as he spoke and grasped the hand of his new-found friend most warmly.

Then he asked:

"Say, whar is yer horse?"

"He will be around when I want him, never fear."

"You is not alone, then?"

"Yes, all alone."

"Which trail is you followin', may I ask?"

"Can you recommend a good place to me for spending a few weeks?"

"I'm the man what kin, pard, for what's ther matter with Hallelujah City?"

"I have not heard that anything was the matter with it, though it is said to be a trifle lawless."

"It is all of that, and more, too; but Kate's Kitchen is the best hotel on earth, and that's sayin' a heap."

"It may not hev gold napkin-rings, embroidered table-cloths and all wich, but ther feed are A Number One, and yer'll find it so, while she do hev good beds fer tried folks."

"Kate's Kitchen are ther place, pard."

"Well, I'll go on with you, Kit, if I am not killed by the road-agents," and the stranger leaped lightly upon the rack and took a seat upon the trunk in the boot.

Kit arranged the leather coverings and then mounting to his box, drove on, muttering his thoughts half aloud as was his wont:

"Now maybe I hev seen him afore and maybe I hav'n't; but he's a dandy all the same in looks, and ef he hev ther narve ter carry out his leetle plan, it will be all O K."

"But I do begin ter fear he hev bit off more than he kin chew."

"I has my team ter look to, and he will hev a nestful o' snakes ter tackle, fer he said as there was six of 'em lyin' in wait."

"Waal, thar may be more, but I hopes not, fer six are a leetle too numerous fer me."

"Still, it's ther Red Sombrero's funeral and he's ter pervide ther corpse, so I stands in ter share ther expense," and Kit began to carefully watch the trail ahead.

He held his reins well in hand, and his foot on the brake, and a revolver lay by his side on the seat, with his handkerchief over it, ready for quick use.

Soon he drew near the spot the stranger had designated.

It was the very place for an ambush, with heavy boulders upon one side, overhung by a cliff, around which the trail wound.

To the left was heavy timber into which the road-agents could dash if they found the force too strong for them.

But all was as quiet there as a May morn, and Kit began to feel that the stranger had mistaken the place, when suddenly a man rode out into the trail ahead of him.

Instantly Kit drew rein, and from either side appeared two men, making five in sight, the last ones being on foot.

They were all dressed in black, wore masks, and were heavily armed.

"Well, Kit, glad ter see you," said the horseman, pleasantly, as he rode toward the coach.

"It's more'n I kin say fer you, Pard Satan," was the response.

"Ah! you flatter me, Kit, for I do not aim to such distinction as being Satan himself, being only one of his imps, by name Mephisto."

"Yer is a liar, fer Major Mephisto got wiped off the 'arth over a year ago."

"I know that well; but I am his ghost—Mephisto's Phantom, you see."

"I'd like ter make a phantom of yer, durn yer!"

A laugh was the response, and then came the words:

"Nothing easier, Kit, for you are armed."

"Yas, but I hain't a durned fool if I is heeled."

"Now what does yer want with me?"

"The money you carry."

"I hain't a passenger inside, and yer kin see I hain't no one on ther box with me."

"Very true, you are going through empty of pilgrims, Kit; but you carry a good sum of money."

"Now yer is away off thar, for I hasn't enough ter buy p'izen ter kill yer."

"Well, of your own dust perhaps not; but you have hidden away some bank-notes in your coach."

"Jist find it, pard, thet's all."

"I will."

"Keep him covered, men, while I get upon the wheel and open the secret box in his new lamps."

As he spoke the masked outlaw stepped upon the wheel and grasped the lamp.

Just then from over the rear of the stage came a shot, followed rapidly by three others.

The shots were not aimed at the leader, but at his men, and at the first one Kit yelled at his horses and the outlaw captain had to spring for his life and as it was fell heavily.

Away dashed the coach, and only a couple of scattering shots followed it, for two of the outlaws had fallen under the fire of the stranger, and the other two had been slightly wounded, yet fired upon the flying coach, for their captain was considerably shaken up by his fall.

"I'm hit, pard," called out Kit, as he glanced back at the stranger, who stood in the boot, his rifle now in hand ready in case there were other road-agents in hiding who would mount and come in pursuit.

But at Kit's call he leaped lightly upon the coach-top and in an instant was by his side on the box.

CHAPTER XXIV.

"GENTLEMAN JACK."

"PARD STRANGER, ther were ther sweetest revolver music I hev ever heerd, even if it did git me a leetle out o' tune, fer I are hurted," said Keen Kit as the stranger passenger took a seat by him upon the box.

"Nothing serious, I hope, Kit, but we will soon know, when I see if those fellows have force enough to follow us."

"They hain't got over ther amazement yet, pard, fer yer hit 'em whar they live."

"I killed two, but the swaying of the coach as it started destroyed my aim on the other two, though I nipped them."

"Yas, but yer missed ther king bee."

"I did not fire at him, if you mean the leader."

"Yas, I means him; but why on 'arth didn't yer nail him?"

"I kept him for another time, Kit, and I feel too kindly toward the hangman to cheat him out of a victim."

"Ah, I see, and yer hopes ter see him ag'in?"

"Yes, we will meet again, Kit; but did you notice anything about his manner of speaking?"

"He were as perlitte as a French count."

"Yes, but what else?"

"Pard, he spoke like a man as wasn't born in the United States."

"Yes, that is it, and I am glad you noticed it, though the accent was very slight; but we are not pursued, so let me look at your wound, and then I will drive for you."

"Can yer handle 'em?"

"Oh, yes, I think so," and taking the reins the stranger brought the coach to a stand-still. Then he skillfully set to work to dress the wound of the plucky driver.

"It is in your shoulder, Kit, but I can extract the ball without trouble—there, here it is," and having drawn a case from his pocket he took from it a probe and pair of pincers with which he quickly drew out the bullet, which was imbedded in the flesh having just reached the bone.

Hastily he dressed the wound and then placing the arm in a sling, said:

"Now I'll drive in for you, Kit, and take your run out and back for you, if you wish, for you must give your arm a week's rest."

"Waal, yer understand handlin' the ribbons, pard, I sees."

"Has yer ever driven ther Overland trails?"

"No, I am an amateur, Kit, but I have had considerable experience in driving."

"I c'd swear to it, fer yer goes ahead ov many a man I knows on the road who are drawin' big pay."

"Maybe yer wants a coach, and ef so I kin fix it fer you?"

"Thank you, no, Kit, I am traveling from a whim of my own, and am in no need of a place of any kind, though I am obliged to you for your kind offer."

"It's me ter be obleeged, pard, fer yer hes done me an eternal sarvice, and I are yours ter command."

"Well, I guess we will be good pards, Kit."

"Now I thinks of it, I ate sorry I recommend- ed yer ter Hallelujah."

"Why so?"

"It are ther place whar thar is more cussed- ness to ther squar' inch than any place I ever seen afore, pard."

"I tell yer thar is killin' thar at ther drop o' a hat, and men as runs ther ranch, now that ther Bravo in Broadcloth are gone."

"Who was he?"

"As clean a cut piece o' manhood as I ever seen, not unlike yerself in build and ways, only he had a clean-shaved face, and looked like a parson, only he wasn't sich."

"A parson?"

"You bet he wasn't for he c'd do more with men than most any folks I ever seen."

"He were ther deadeadest dead shot on ther plains, c'd outride a Comanche, and ef Sampson, who yer reads about in ther Bible, hed tackled him fer strength, he'd 'a' found his match, and I'll sw'ar to it."

"And where is this Bravo in Broadcloth now?"

"Ther Lord only knows, pard."

"He come inter Hallelujah mysterious like, and he lit out ther same way, and I hes never heard o' him since."

"Folks did say maybe he were ther chief o' ther Toll-Takers; but ef he were he was a gent clean through, and it did look suspicious, as he went off about ther time ther Toll-Takers gang were wiped out."

"But when he were in Hallelujah City, he run things in great shape, and accordin' ter his idee o' law."

"Ther desperado pards hed ter throw up ther hands and squeal, and he were ther King Bee o' ther camps, though he never was ther man ter pick a quarrel, though he were in it ter make fur fly when it got ter goin' ag'in' his idee o' right."

"Pard, I wishes yer hed 'a' know'd him."

"Yes, I am always glad to meet a man who is out of the average of men."

"But, how far is it to Hallelujah City now?"

"When we rises ther ridge yonder we'll look down inter ther valley, and half an hour after will fetch us ter Kate's Kitchen."

The stage rolled on, and the stranger handled the reins in a manner that delighted the driver, who almost forgot his wound in watching his skill in driving, for the trail was a difficult one to pass over.

Soon the valley lay before them, dotted with the mining-camps, and Hallelujah City was pointed out, a cluster of cabins and larger shanties having for a common center a pretentious structure that dwarfed the others as a hen does a brood of chickens.

This Kit pointed out as the hotel known as Kate's Kitchen, and he seemed proud of the opportunity of doing so, and was pleased to see that the stranger appeared duly impressed therewith.

In fine style the coach dashed up to the hotel door, the six horses being brought to a halt as one animal, and the style of the driver at once riveted every eye, while Kit's appearance showed that there had been trouble.

The arrival of the stranger at Kate's Kitchen has already been referred to, but not enlarged upon, and it may not be amiss to here state that Kit introduced his new-found friend with a whoop and a hoop-la.

"Pards, ther man as says I hain't acquainted with ther best man as lives on air, jest lies, thet are all."

"Here he be—Mr. Jack Overton, from nowhar in partickelar and everywhar in ginerel, travelin' fer health and pleasure at his own expense."

"Here he are; Gentleman Jack, I names him, for he are a man, and a gent, too, and he hev this day saved ther money I were bringing through, hev kept me from tarnin' up my toes, and left some keepsakes back on ther trail fer ther Toll-Takers ter remember him by."

Before Kit could say more one of his enthusiastic admirers, for the driver was a prime favorite and a big man in Hallelujah City, called out:

"Three cheers and a Rocky Mount'in grizzly's growl fer Gentleman Jack, ther stranger in ther red sombrero!"

The cheers were given with a roar, the growl resounded like distant thunder, and Gentleman Jack led the way to the bar of the Queen of Hearts, which was just the proper caper under the circumstances, and was a big thing in his favor with many of these present.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE TOLL-TAKERS AT HOME.

MAJOR MEPHISTO, the founder of the band of outlaws known as the Toll-Takers, had chosen well in his retreats.

Had he been given the opportunity in honorable warfare, he would have made a great general without doubt.

He had been bold, cunning and clever, as well as lawless and a desperado.

Organizing his band with discipline more severe than the military, he yet divided liberally with them the results of their forages, fed and clothed them well, and protected them by selecting the most secure hiding-places.

He did not operate in any one community long, but struck the stage-trails, settlements and wagon-trains at various points.

When at last force enough to annihilate him was sent in pursuit, he had gone, and next would be heard of two hundred miles away.

And so it went, until he became a terror, and as hard to catch as a grizzly in a trap, and as dangerous.

But Major Mephisto got his death-wound one day and his successor was Branch Bainbridge, the man whom the reader knows as the twin brother of Mortimer Bainbridge, the Texan ranchero, and who wrecked that brother's life, or nearly so.

But Branch Bainbridge, fugitive from justice, outlaw, Danite chief and all that was bad, who had run off with his brother's lady-love, made her his wife and then dragged her into his lawless life, met his death when that wronged Texan took his trail and never left it until it ended at the grave of the guilty man.

Then boldly impersonating his brother, as he had been impersonated, Mortimer Bainbridge became the chief of the Toll-Takers, to in the end wipe them out and rescue poor Jessie, whom he carried back to her father in Texas.

Since the destruction of the band, and the escape of their lieutenant, Monte Miranda, there had been no Toll-Takers seen upon the border trails for a long time.

Then Rockwell had gotten together a few men and operated upon the far Western trails, until his strange meeting with his old lieutenant, Monte, the Mexican, and the compact between them the reader knows.

And back to the old stronghold, the place which had been fatal to them, the valley which was dotted with the graves of those who had fallen in the fight with Buffalo Bill's scouts and the Boys in Blue, went Monte, the Mexican, to once more have it for his retreat.

The spot was certainly a good one for both a hiding-place and a stronghold.

The valley was a large one, and across one end ran the Overland Trail, and so many had been the tragedies there that it had gained the name of the "Valley of the Shadow of Death."

From where the trail entered it, and left it through a canyon piercing the ridge, the valley narrowed, following a large, swift-flowing stream, first flowing upon one side, then on the other of the vale, and with precipitous and rugged banks, timber and thickets, until only one well acquainted with the intricacies of the trails could find his way through.

Thus it was that the Toll-Takers could drop all pursuers, and reaching the wild and rugged ridges in the lofty ranges of mountains at the valley and river head, they could laugh at their foes.

The stronghold proper of the outlaws was a glen in the mountains, sheltered by a ridge of precipices upon one side, and sloping to the river.

Down this they could command a fine view, and rally against attack, while to flank and attack them from the mountain-side would be next to impossible without a guide, and a work of days to get there even with one.

If driven from this retreat, the Toll-Takers could go on up into the ranges, and, by a rapid retreat, leave their foes far behind, while they sought new fields for their lawless acts.

I refer to the security and inaccessibility of the retreat, to show how hard it was to catch the Toll-Takers napping, and then to follow them after an attack.

The cabins were of logs, with grass roofs, and yet not uncomfortable.

The chief's cabin had two rooms in it, an attempt at furniture and from what was called by courtesy a piazza in front, a fine view of the camp, the glen, river and further valley could be had.

Back of his cabin was a crevice in a high cliff of rocks, which had been a quick means of escape, if needed, by way of a rope ladder.

Here it was, in this camp, that Monte Mi-

randa joined Rockwell and his men when he arrived.

Already deciding upon his future course, as regarded Cleo Amidon, Monte had hinted to Rockwell that he might bring a lady with him, but whether his wife, or a captive, the outlaw lieutenant did not know.

Still he made the best preparations in his power for her comfort, and had the cabin of the former chief in good condition on the afternoon when the Mexican and the supposed boy rode into the stronghold.

Rockwell had been there for over a week, and had brought with him just eight men, several of whom had been old Toll-Takers under Major Mephisto, Branch Bainbridge, and Monte himself.

They were as hard a lot of cut-throats as ever had been gathered together, and Monte was proud of them when he looked them over.

He told Rockwell that his wife had accompanied him to play the part of boy, decoy or the spirit of the Woman in Black as need arose for her services, and the men so understood her coming, while as she at once took an interest in their welfare, saw to the fitting up of their cabins with some comfort, they took a fancy to her.

The Mexican had come well supplied with provisions, clothing and all material needed, and in a few days the camp presented a very home-like appearance.

A rope ladder had been made, and hung from the cliff into the crevice, to be a safeguard for escape, and each day and night a mounted man was to be on duty to watch for a foe and to give warning.

Not to attract attention to his retreat, Monte had begun his lawless operations afar off from there, with a few of his men, or had Rockwell hold up a coach, or dash into a mining-camp.

He was anxious to let the idea go abroad that the valley was haunted by the ghosts of Major Mephisto and the Woman in Black, who had been the unfortunate Jessie Noland.

To this aim he had shown himself several times, to a coach-load of people, rigged up to resemble the former outlaw chief, and had Cleo appear on horseback dressed as had been the Woman in Black.

As they dashed by in the dusk of the evening, their horses hoofs muffled and in silence, the superstitious among the miners and soldiers soon began to dread that there were "ghosts" in the Valley of the Shadow of Death.

But the one hope of his life was to get possession of his cousin, Heloise Hembold, and to this end Monte Miranda plotted until at last he hit upon a plan, and with the aid of his beautiful, but sinful wife, determined to carry it out.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE DECOY AND HER VICTIM.

IT will be well to now return to the fair young girl whose life had been so clouded by her unfortunate relationship to the Mexican outlaw, Miranda.

It will be remembered that a robbery of Tom Todd's stage-coach had occurred on the Overland one day, and the greatest seeming victim was the alleged daughter of a late army officer by the name of Braddock.

This daughter had the deepest sympathy of good-hearted Tom Todd, and he had, upon arriving at the end of his run, at once secured horses and carried her over to the fort, where she was at once received with the greatest hospitality.

To Major Hembold her father, had been well known, and so he at once made her his guest, greatly to the delight of his own beautiful daughter Heloise.

Miss Braddock had reported that she was on her way to live with relatives in the East, having settled up her father's belongings, and what he had she had transferred to the New York attorneys to invest for her.

Her own belongings, with jewelry and considerable money, she had brought with her, and the result was that she had been left utterly destitute, until she could receive funds from the East.

That there was a shadow of doubt of her story not one suspected, and she at once became a fair rival of the beautiful Heloise as has been seen.

Her beauty of face and form, her wit and genial nature, quite won Heloise Hembold's heart, and she was charmed to have the stranger as her guest, and often told her how she wished she could live at Fort Grand, and that when she did receive remittance she would be in no hurry to depart.

Major Hembold had at once placed his purse at her disposal, if she deemed it necessary to go on her way, but Belle Braddock had declined the kind offer, and said that it would be a pleasure to wait at the fort for a few weeks, where all were so kind to her.

So it was that she remained until that fateful afternoon, when, at her request, she and Heloise had gone for a gallop all alone on the plains.

Several times the good judgment of Heloise had suggested a return, but Belle had urged to

go on, until at last they reached the ford of the river.

Then came the sudden act of Belle Braddock, when Heloise wished to return, seizing her bridle-rein and drawing and leveling a revolver at her, with the words:

"I have played my cards well, Heloise Hembold, and you are my prisoner!"

Heloise was startled, then dubious, and she said, with a laugh:

"A true border girl you are, Belle, for that was done as true to life as a road-agent could do it."

"And a road-agent I am, Heloise Hembold, and you are my prisoner, so no nonsense."

The tone and manner caused Heloise to look earnestly into the face of her false friend.

What she saw there in the flashing eyes, stern-set mouth and pallor, told her that Belle Braddock was in earnest, that she was her foe, not her friend.

But Heloise was blessed with wonderful nerve, and she asked:

"Am I to understand that you have been playing a part, or have you lost your mind, Miss Braddock?"

"I have not lost my mind, and, though I have been playing a part, I am not now, and you are to go with me."

"Whither?"

"To the retreat of the Toll-Takers."

Heloise turned pale, but calmly asked:

"Are you a traitress, then, a decoy of the Toll-Takers of the trails?"

"Yes."

"And you have played a part to injure me, you have been a snake in the grass, where we deemed you a dove?"

"I am just what you care to call me, Miss Hembold, and I warn you that I played my game to win."

"Having won, I will not allow of any chance of escape on your part."

"You are in the pay of that arch-villain, Monte Miranda?"

"Yes, if you so call him."

Quick as a flash the whip-handle of Heloise fell upon the wrist of Belle Braddock, and the small revolver dropped from her hand.

The lash fell heavily then upon her horse, which gave a mighty bound into the air and attempted to dash away.

But, though suffering from the blow, Belle Braddock held hard with her other hand the bridle-rein of Heloise's horse, and drawing a small derringer from her bosom she cried:

"Check your horse, or I will kill him!"

The answer of Heloise was to draw her own revolver from the saddle-holster and level it at the head of Belle's horse.

"Unhand my rein or I fire!"

The answer was a laugh, and Heloise pulled trigger.

Then came the words:

"The snapping of caps does not kill, fair Heloise, and I took occasion last night to take the loads from your revolver."

"You are in my power, you understand."

Heloise was almost overcome by the alarming position she found herself in, and reeled as though about to fall in a faint from her saddle.

But in an instant she recovered herself to find that the beautiful decoy had thrown the noose of her lariat over her waist and made the other end fast around the horn of her saddle.

"Now, if you attempt to dash away, you will be dragged from your saddle," said the decoy, with a wicked smile at her victim.

CHAPTER XXVII.

HER OWN STORY.

THOUGH she felt that the false woman, calling herself Belle Braddock, had gotten the better of her then, Heloise Hembold rallied her nerve very quickly and regained her composure.

She was not one to give up hope until not a ray of hope lasted.

She recalled that the scheme had been a clever and a daring one, and Belle Braddock had carried it out with consummate skill.

She also ceased to blame herself for having fallen a victim, as the beautiful woman had deceived every one else at the fort.

Remembering her former captivity, she knew how she had been trailed and rescued in the end by the noble men who had started to take her from the clutches of her foes.

Then Monte Miranda had meant to force her into a marriage with him, and all his motives she knew, for she had received notification of her grandfather's will and its terms.

Her father was not a rich man, but she preferred to be poor, than to accept inheritance upon the terms of the Mexican's will.

Now she did not doubt but that Monte Miranda intended to play the same game.

How it would all end she did not know, but she hoped for the best.

Buffalo Bill, Surgeon Powell, Wild Bill, Texas Jack, and Captain Jack Crawford, the hero scouts, flashed through her mind, and she knew that they could almost trail a bird.

Then she recalled the handsome young captain, Alfred Taylor, and her many other

friends, and knew that they would be close behind the scouts upon the trail to find her.

She would be soon missed, the trail taken up, and she could not believe that, clever as she was, Belle Braddock could hide her tracks from the Argus-eyed scouts, and alone make her escape with her prisoner.

So she took a cheerful idea of her situation, and it was clouded only by the distress her poor father would feel.

He had seemed full of unrest of late, and, though attending to his duties, he had not appeared to her just well.

Her capture would be a great blow to him.

Of course no one would suspect the cunning traitress, Belle Braddock, and it would be supposed that Indians or road-agents had captured them both.

"What are you waiting for?" she suddenly asked her captor, as Belle Braddock did not cross the river.

"You will soon see—yes, now, for look there!"

Heloise quickly gazed in the direction indicated, which was down the river.

They were upon their horses, at the brink of the river at the ford, and could obtain a view for some distance down the stream.

Around the bend had appeared a party of five horsemen riding along the bank upon the opposite side of the river.

They discovered the decoy and her captive at the same moment they were seen, and rode rapidly toward them and across the ford.

Heloise regarded them curiously and with some anxiety as they approached.

She saw that they expected to find the decoy and herself there, and at once her hopes of escaping from Belle Braddock disappeared.

It showed her, too, how clever was the plan of the woman to kidnap her and how perfectly it had been carried out.

As the men were half a mile away when discovered, Heloise had time to ask her captor a few questions which she was anxious to know, so she began with:

"What motive had you for wishing to kidnap me, may I ask?"

"I simply obey my orders."

"You have nothing against me?"

"No more than you are beautiful and good, and as I cannot be good myself, I hate those who can."

"You do not look like one with an evil heart."

"I am, though."

"Your face is as innocently beautiful as a child's, and there is not a false tone in your voice."

"That shows how our faces are masks, and that sweet voices have the power to wound deep."

"Why do you not cast behind you this life you lead?"

"Come! return with me to the fort, for our horses will distance all pursuit, as you know, and I will keep your secret, and you can lead a different life and a happier one."

"Will you not do this, Belle, for my sake, for your own sake, for your soul hangs upon your decision."

For a moment the strange woman softened under the appeal from one whom she knew to be true at heart.

Then she shook her pretty head almost viciously and cried:

"No, no, I will not be tempted."

"If I yielded now to good, I would yield again to evil at the first temptation."

"I am more sorry for you, Belle Braddock, than I am for myself, strange as it may seem to you," said Heloise sadly.

The woman bit her lips and said:

"Don't call me Belle Braddock, for that is not my name."

"I am glad to hear it, for I wondered how the daughter of an army officer could become what you have."

"Who are you?"

"I went to school with Belle Braddock and hated her."

"She was more beautiful than I—"

"I cannot see how that can be."

"It is true, as it also is that you are more beautiful in face and form than I am."

"Belle Braddock had a voice superior to mine, she took the first prizes in music, drawing and French where I got the second."

"She won perfect deportment marks where I was far down the scale, for the devil in me would show itself."

"She was popular, I was not."

"Thus it was that I hated her with all my soul."

"She left school with the first honors, I with the second only, and then one whom I admired loved her, a man."

"Then I hated her more."

"I knew that she loved him, so I separated them by scheming, and then sent her a notice of his marriage with me."

"You married him?"

"No, I only sent her a false notice, and it turned her brain and she is now in a lunatic asylum."

"I knew that her father had lived a retired

life, that none of his old army officers knew his daughter, and as he was dead and she was in the lunatic asylum, I took her name when I came to the fort."

"I was not robbed, it was all a well-planned plot, for I came to this very spot on horseback with Monte Miranda ten days before I went to the fort."

"All the ground was gone over, all the plot planned, and having taken the coach at a distant station, Monte Miranda and his men were the men who held it up, and robbing others pretended to rob me."

"See?"

"Yes, I see it all, and you are indeed a beautiful fiend."

"Thank you, for I like praise when I do my work well."

"You asked my name?"

"Yes."

"It is Cleopatra Amidon, and I am a Mormon's daughter."

"Here come the Toll-Takers now," and she turned to the horsemen as they crossed the ford to where they awaited them.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A BLIND TRAIL.

THE party on horseback did not leave the river, but sat upon their horses there.

There were five of them, and they were all dressed in black and wore masks.

The leader rode a splendid black horse, was attired, Heloise at once noticed, very much as Major Mephisto had been, for she had seen that worthy, and though he was completely masked, she felt that she could not be wrong, so she said, quietly:

"Again I am a victim of your cruel persecution, Señor Monte Miranda."

The man started slightly, glanced at the decoy, and responded:

"You know me, then?"

"Who else could thus wrong me, sir?"

"Well, you are my prisoner, my sweet cousin, and it remains with you as to your future."

"You have done your work well, Lady Captain."

"I am glad to have pleased my chief; but I would advise no delay, for you are late in arriving here, and we may be followed."

"Has! followed? Then you were suspected?"

"Oh, no; but we were both so popular with the young officers, they always follow us when we ride out alone, claiming dread of Indians, and some of them may even now be following us, so I would advise haste."

"You are right."

"Come, Cousin Heloise, I claim your company."

And the Mexican rode alongside of Heloise and made his lariat fast to her horse.

Then he led the way into the ford, and at once turned down the stream with the remark:

"Those who pursue will find a blind trail to follow, Cousin Heloise, and not even your famous scouts Buffalo Bill and the Surgeon Scout Powell can follow me."

"I am not so sure of that, Monte Miranda," Heloise replied.

"Well, we shall see; but be careful now, for your horse has a long swim before him, though do not be frightened."

"I fear death less than I do you, my ignoble cousin," was the plucky rejoinder, and as Heloise spoke her horse began to swim.

Monte Miranda had taken the mask from his face to see the better, and now guided his horse and that of Heloise down the stream and over toward the further shore.

Behind came Cleo Amidon, her horse swimming easily, and stretched out behind her were the four road-agents.

The bold leader guided well, and held his horse firmly on his course.

It was a long and hard swim, though the current swept them rapidly along on their way.

There was one shoal knee-deep, where they halted for a rest for their horses, and after a few minutes again went on.

Bending to the right, they came, after another long swim, to the spot which had been found by Surgeon Powell and Buffalo Bill, and a landing was made.

Up the narrow canyon they went, holding in the little stream, crossing the mountain trail, and thus on up to the top of the ridge, where they turned off to the left.

"Now, cousin mine, you surely will not say that the handsome Surgeon Scout can follow the trail we have left behind us?" said Monte Miranda.

"If he does not, Buffalo Bill will, or both will together."

"Water leaves no trail."

"That depends upon where you enter and leave it."

"Well, how can they find out where we entered it?"

"From the trail at the ford."

"It is a drinking-place for buffalo, bear and deer, so they will track out all hoof-trails before morning."

"Perhaps so."

"Well, granted that they found we took the

"water there, and I do not believe that they will, how will they discover where we left it?"

"They may go down the river as you did."

"No, not even those dare-devils will do that."

"Well, your trails open where you left the stream."

"True, but they will see where the mountain trail crossed the stream, and not follow on up to the ridge."

"I do not believe that they will be less skillful in following my trail than they are in trailing an Indian."

"You have firm faith in the scouts of the plains."

"I have had reason to have."

"Well, we will soon take to the river again, and then you will be convinced that your heroes cannot follow us."

Soon after they arrived again at the river, at the point where Buffalo Bill and Surgeon Powell had given up the trail in despair.

The outlaw chief again rode boldly in, with Heloise by his side, and Cleo and the others following as before.

A swim of a quarter of a mile brought them to a shoal, and here they came to a halt, while the chief pointed to a bend in the river around which was appearing a rudely-constructed flat-boat.

Heloise gazed upon it with interest and wonder.

It was some twenty feet in length, by twelve in width, had high sides, and both ends were blunt.

Over the center of the bow passed a rope, which the three men in the boat were hauling upon as it turned once over a windlass.

It came along slowly but surely against the swiftly-flowing stream, a cable being anchored far ahead.

"You did not expect to find a boat navigating these waters, Cousin Heloise?" said Monte, speaking in his half-polite, half-sneering manner.

"I confess that I did not."

"We built it a month ago, and it is no mean piece of work for the frontier, and is perfectly safe."

"The cable is anchored yonder, fifty feet above this shoal in the rocks, so that it will come right here, and these are barriers to pen the horses in, and you will see that we will leave a trail which no one can follow."

"If your ingenious brain ferreted out the means for evil purpose, the ingenious brain of the scouts will ferret it out for good," was the answer.

The boat had now drawn nearer, and half an hour after being discovered, came up alongside the shoal where the group awaited it.

A barrier was then put up around the center of the boat, and a gangway placed over the side.

Without hesitation the horse of the chief walked over it into the boat.

Heloise dismounted upon the side of the flat and her horse was led on.

Cleo Amidon did the same, and the horses of the men were then led on and placed in the barriers and fastened.

With the rope over the stern, as a means of guiding it, the flat-boat went swiftly down the river.

Here and there the cable was spliced, but it seemed endless to Heloise, and it was nearly a mile before they came to the end of the rope.

The river here was very wide and formed an eddy over on one shore through which the boat drifted slowly, and the chief said to Heloise:

"We can use our sweeps in coming up here, as we are out of the swift current, until we get a mile below, where we land."

Heloise made no reply and watched their progress slowly.

At last they ran in close to an island, densely overgrown by a thicket of willows, and here the boat was poled into a secure hiding-place.

All mounted then once more, took to the water, and the horses swam the hundred yards to the shore.

"Now, Cousin Heloise, you have seen my blind trail, and I defy mortal man to follow it," said the chief, as they went into camp on the river-banks just as the sun set.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE OUTLAW'S ALTERNATIVE.

THE Mexican camped for the night on the river-bank without seemingly any dread of scouts or soldiers.

He had his men make a good resting-place for Heloise and Cleo Amidon, and in such a position that the captive could not leave it without passing near some of the outlaws, while the decoy was also expected to guard her well.

The camping-place seemed to have been quite often used before, for there were the three horses of the men who had brought the boat up the river, and the fire still burned.

Provisions and blankets were hidden away among the rocks, and Heloise felt certain that the outlaws had been encamped there for some days, waiting for Cleo Amidon to kidnap her.

But how had she communicated with them she wondered.

Then it came to her that there was hardly a day passed that Cleo had not taken a ride, and no matter with whom she went, she always sought a certain place for wild flowers, and dismounted herself to gather them, and once she had seen her slip something into the hollow of a tree, and now knew that it must have been a receptacle known to Monte Miranda and herself, where letters were left reporting her progress.

"It was a wonderfully well planned and executed plot," she said to herself, as, after eating a hearty supper, she lay upon her blankets thinking over the adventures of the day.

A wicky-up had been built for Cleo and herself, and their resting-place softened by fine straw under their blankets, so that she was by no means uncomfortable.

Early in the morning they were awakened, for Heloise had slept soundly, knowing the impossibility of making her escape then, though she did not give up hope of doing so at some time in the future.

After a good breakfast at which Monte Miranda made himself very agreeable, they mounted and rode on their way.

Now and then efforts were made to cover up their trails, and then they would resume their way, pressing on at a good pace.

A halt at noon for an hour was made, and then the horses were urged on rapidly all the afternoon, when the valley came in sight.

Recognizing her old place of imprisonment, Heloise said:

"You are bold to select the same retreat that Major Mephisto had."

"Yes, Cousin Heloise, I did so to show how little I fear the soldiers."

"And the scouts?"

"Yes, of course."

"Is your force so much larger than it was then?"

"Oh, yes," was the ready lie.

But Heloise had her own opinion as to the force of her degenerate cousin, as she had heard it discussed one day by the officers, and Surgeon Powell had said he did not believe there were over a dozen men in the band.

So she said:

"Suppose I told you, Cousin Monte, that you had not a dozen men."

She saw him start and knew that Surgeon Powell had hit pretty near the truth, and, with a laugh, she added, calling him "Cousin Monte," as she usually did, in a tone of sarcasm:

"You see, I know more of you than you think, Cousin Monte."

"Now, Miss Amidon did not have to tell me who was the master of this plot to kidnap me, for I knew that it was none other than Monte Miranda, the Mexican outlaw, though he did not know that any one was aware of his having taken to the road again as a footpad after his very narrow escape from hanging."

"Don't let your tongue run away with your reason, girl," he said, with anger.

"Why? Because you might strike or kill me?"

"Well, it would not surprise me, and, in truth, I would rather die by your hand than live near you."

"But I think I shall live to one day see you hanged, Cousin Monte."

The Mexican uttered a Spanish oath, but changed the subject with the question:

"See here, sweet cousin, what became of the then chief of the Toll-Takers?"

She saw that he evidently knew nothing of the masquerading of Mortimer Bainbridge as his brother, the Danite chief, remembering that he had escaped before the attack on the outlaw stronghold, and that the pretended chief had kept himself hidden, not wishing the secret known.

So she said:

"Yes, I forget that you deceived the scouts, who held you prisoner, with a pledge to rescue me for them, and took that opportunity of escaping from the attack on the fort."

"I knew all was lost, so left."

"You were wise in that, for now you live to tell it; but are there any of the men here now who were at the retreat at the time of the soldiers' attack?"

"No, though I have Rockwell and several of the old band with me, and who escaped by being off on scouting duty at the time of the attack."

"Why do you ask?"

"Oh, simply because I thought it would be so pleasant to meet old friends again," was the sarcastic reply.

"Well, you will find I have men enough here to hold you prisoner, and I engaged the services of Miss Amidon especially to entrap you, and now she is to be your fair guardian, so escape is impossible."

"Doubtless; but what is your intention regarding me?"

"You know the terms of your grandfather's will."

"Perfectly."

"You are aware that, unless you become my wife, neither of us gets a peso?"

"Yes."

"If you become my wife, we get conjointly the large fortune?"

"I understand; but I thought you could not go to Mexico, that you were a fugitive from there."

"So I am; but money buys clemency, you know, and I have affairs arranged there so that if I return as the possessor of the large fortune I am heir to, conjointly with you, why, it will be very different from what it would be if I returned poor, and I will be welcomed with open arms."

"But to get this, you must make me your wife?"

"Yes."

"I will never consent, as you know."

"Become my wife, return with me to Mexico as such, get our inheritance, and let me receive my share, and I will release you that very day to return to the United States and get a divorce from me."

"If I refuse?"

"Then you will wish to Heaven you had never been born!" was the vehement response of the Mexican.

CHAPTER XXX.

GENTLEMAN JACK CHIPS IN.

WHEN the man whom Keen Kit had publicly presented to the citizens of Glory Hallelujah City as Gentleman Jack, had made himself "solid" with those who could be bought for a drink and a cigar, he turned from the saloon with the driver with the remark:

"Now, Kit, I must get a room and then I will see to your wound more thoroughly, for you are too good a man to be laid up when needed."

"All right, Gentleman Jack, I'll interduce you to Landlady Kate, and ef she don't win yer heart it's because yer hain't got none, fer she do make married men feel kinder as though they hed been a leetle too hasty in gettin' spliced."

"Thar she be now," and Kit led the way into the lounging-room of the hotel, at one of which was the "office."

This was an alcove, protected by a counter running across the space, and it was made of stout logs, the stranger noted, and rose to a height of five feet.

Behind this was a partition with a door in the center, and beyond a small room with a window in one end and a door opening into a narrow passageway which led up-stairs, so that the occupant could not be very readily flanked.

In the office were two persons, a young man who acted as clerk, and Kate, who had just entered from the stairway.

Advancing to the barrier, or counter, Keen Kit said:

"Lady Kate, it does me proud ter interduce to yer my partick'lar pard, a clean man from 'wayback, who are already christened in Hallelujah lingo as Gentleman Jack, though what name he wants ter write on yer books I doesn't know."

"He saved me from bein' kilt, and a lot o' money from bein' tuk, while he closed ther eyes in everlastin' slumber o' several road-agints as hed bizziness with us."

"Gentleman Jack, this are Lady Kate, and she are as squar' fer a woman as you be fer a man, and that are sayin' a great deal."

"Shake!"

With a musical laugh the young and very handsome landlady of Kate's Kitchen held forth her hand to the stranger, who grasped it warmly with the remark:

"I am glad to have the honor, madam, and I am a pleader for your hospitality, for I expect to remain some time in your town."

"It will be my pleasure to entertain you, sir, and having overheard Kit's introduction of you in the saloon, permit me to say that Hallelujah City will be benefited by your coming."

"Scott, give the gentleman the Valley View Room which Buffalo Bill and Wild Bill had when they were here," and she turned to the young clerk, who was something of a border swell, or thought himself so, which amounted to the same thing.

"Register, please, Mister—Mister—I didn't quite catch your name?" he said, in a pompous way.

"I suppose not, sir, as it was not mentioned."

"A pen, please," said the stranger, and Kit smiled.

Taking the pen, the stranger wrote in a bold hand:

"JACK OVERTON,

Gentleman."

"Lordy, pard, yer slings ink as yer does bullets."

"See here, Scotty, my lad, you take good care o' my pard, or I'll never do yer a favor ag'in in my life, does yer hear?"

"Yes, Kit, I'll see to his comfort," and Scotty having eyed the stranger more particularly, felt sure that he could not impress him with his importance, so decided not to make an enemy of him.

Accordingly he led the way to the rooms Lady Kate had designated, and told him to take his choice.

"I'll take both, as there is a communicating

door, and I will have a couple of horses, for which I desire stable room, please.

"Now, Kit, let me see to that wound again, and I know Lady Kate will let me have bandages and other things needful."

Scotty took the hint and retired, while the stranger stepped to one of the windows of the really pleasant room and looked out.

The view was really grand, and looked far down the valley in one side, and across to the mountain ranges in the other.

The adjoining room looked out over the rear of the building upon the coach stables, and the stranger seemed much pleased with his accommodations.

"The plan here, pard, is pay in advance, but jist order up all yer needs, fer I stands good for it," said Kit.

"Thank you, Kit, but I am well supplied with money."

"I thought yer hed dust from yer looks, but didn't know how high-priced these rooms be, so concluded to mention it."

"I always want the best, Kit, and can pay for it," was the quiet reply.

Just then came a gentle tap upon the door, and Lady Kate entered with bandages and a bottle of Pond's Extract to dress Kit's wound.

She watched the stranger skillfully dress the wound and ventured:

"You are a surgeon, are you not, Mr. Overton?"

"Gentleman Jack, please, Lady Kate, is what Kit says my name is to be here," he answered with a smile, and then added:

"Not a professional surgeon, Lady Kate, though I have had considerable experience in wounds."

"Yas, in makin' 'em, I'll bet yer," said Kit, who was a hero-worshiper, and already looked upon his new-found friend as a hero of heroes.

When he had finished dressing the wound Kit said he felt as well as ever, but the stranger told him that he would go with him on his next two runs to do the driving, as he must not use his arm for some days.

"I'll be only too glad, pard; but now let us go down and feed, for I has told yer what Lady Kate kin do in thet line, and I jist give her a hint down-stairs not ter go back on me, and she won't."

Lady Kate led the way to the supper-room, where Gentleman Jack was placed at the table for "distinguished guests," and where Kit always had his seat, for an Overland stage-driver was a great personage in those days with all.

Gentleman Jack soon told Kit that he had not half done credit to Lady Kate's table, and soon after the two sauntered out upon the piazza, Kit promising to introduce his new pard to Gambler Lou that night in the Queen of Hearts Saloon, for he was determined the stranger should see all there was to Hallelujah City.

Hardly had they reached the piazza when they came upon a scene which brought from the lips of Gentleman Jack the words:

"That is a shame, and I shall not permit it."

What he referred to was a negro dancing under compulsion on the piazza, for one burly fellow was striking at his feet with a stick, while another held a revolver covering the poor fellow to make him dance.

Stepping quickly forward Gentleman Jack seized the man with the revolver and tossed him, with an exhibition of marvelous strength clean off the piazza, while he suddenly wrenched the stick from the other fellow, and covering him with his pistol said sternly:

"It is your time now to make tracks!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

A JUST PUNISHMENT.

THE crowd upon the piazza of Kate's Kitchen was a large one, when Gentleman Jack "chipped in" to defend the negro man from insult at the hands of two bullies.

The report of the stage having been held up, and Keen Kit wounded by road agents, had drawn many to that famous meeting place, the hotel piazza, and then, too, the rumor of a "dandy stranger" with a red sombrero having arrived, caused others to assemble, especially as it was reported that he was a hero.

So when Keen Kit, with his arm in a sling, and the stranger, walked out upon the piazza, they found a large number of noisy men, discussing the attempted robbery, the wounding of Kit, the rescue by the unknown man with the red sombrero, and enjoying, most of them, the antics of a negro man forced to dance, under fear of personal injury, by two of the greatest desperadoes in Hallelujah.

They were cruel facet fellows, ever ready for a fight, and picking upon those whom they could bully with impunity.

The negro had ridden into town on a fine mule, with pickax and other implements in his outfit, and he had come to hunt for a fortune in the mines.

He had gone to the stable with his mule, paid for a night's care of the animal, and then, having his supper in the kitchen of the hotel, had strolled around to the front to have a look at the people.

Instantly he had been seized upon by the two bullies, who were known collectively as "The

Twins," as they were never apart, and individually as Irish Pat and Dutch Dave.

One was a burly Irishman, six feet two in his stockings, and prided himself upon his great strength and science as a pugilist.

The other was a German, misnamed Dutch Dave.

He spoke with little accent, and claimed to have been a master-at-arms in the German Army.

The "fellow feeling" which had drawn the two together as pards was evidently their evil natures.

They made a butt of all who dared not resist their teasing them, gambled for a living rather than worked their claims, and were known as an "ugly pair."

Many a man would have had the courage to resent the insults of one of them, if found alone, but together he dared not attack them, as any one who had done so had never lived to regret it.

They seemed trained to work in unison, each look and sign of the one was known to the other, and both being large, powerful men, they had matters pretty well their own way in Hallelujah City.

And yet Gentleman Jack had pounced upon "The Twins" as an introduction to the mining-camps.

The two men had come to the hotel expressly to see the stranger.

They made it a rule to subdue every newcomer from the start, and he should not be an exception.

While waiting for him to finish his supper they had seen the unfortunate negro man, who had a fearless, honest face, and was dressed in buckskin, moccasins and a coonskin cap, while he wore a belt of arms.

Still, taken at disadvantage, a stranger, with no one to befriend him, he had found himself at the mercy of the two bullies, and at their command had danced, while many in the crowd howled with delight, though there were others who were not in favor of the cruel display.

Having lighted his cigar, the stranger strolled out upon the piazza as though at peace with the world, when his eyes fell upon the exhibition.

Then he acted, and so promptly that Irish Pat went flying off of the piazza, and Dutch Dave was covered with a revolver before a second had elapsed.

"Now, sir, beg that man's pardon, or I'll kill you!"

A deathlike silence fell upon the crowd. The stranger had come to Hallelujah to chip in regardless of circumstances, and he had selected the best material in the camps to show what he was made of.

Keen Kit was amazed, but drew a revolver with his left hand.

He meant to see fair play.

The negro, released from the muzzle of Irish Pat's revolver, had sprung like a panther off the piazza and covered him with his own weapon as he lay upon the ground.

"Yer has ther drop on me, Pard Stranger, and yer tuk it underhand," growled Dutch Dave.

"You lie, my man, for I go behind no man's back to strike him."

"Ask that negro's pardon, for he can hear you."

"I hain't askin' niggers' pardons, pard, for I hain't in that line of business."

"Do as I tell you, or I will make him knock you down, yes, and your cowardly pard too, as a balm to his feelings."

"I'll not do it."

"All right."

"Here, my man, bring that cowardly bully here."

The silence was painful, and all eyes were riveted upon Gentleman Jack.

"Boss, yer is wanted, so go thar," the negro said to Irish Pat.

"I hain't goin' ter move, ef yer has got ther drop on me," growled Irish Pat.

The negro laid his hand upon his shoulder, but found, strong as he appeared to be himself, he could do nothing with him.

"Never mind, for I'll bring my man to you," pleasantly called out Gentleman Jack, and right there came another exhibition of his wonderful strength, for he seized Dutch Dave, and with a spring was off the piazza, dragging him after him as an ordinary man might a small child.

A perfect yell of admiration went up from the crowd, and Keen Kit crept close behind the stranger.

"Now, my man, these men are armed, but they have better sense than to attempt to use their weapons now."

"I'll give them a chance to ask your pardon, call it quits all round and I'll stand treat for the crowd."

"If they refuse, then they must be the sufferers."

"Come, ask this man's pardon for the insult you offered him."

"I'll see him durned first," growled Irish Pat.

"And you?"

"I sides with my pard."

"All right, perhaps it is better."

"Now, my man, strike straight from the shoulder, and knock this gentleman down!"

The negro glanced at the stranger, then looked over the crowd, and doubled up his fist.

"See here, nagur, if yer strikes me it's the last act of your life," shouted Irish Pat.

"Yes, and me, too," said Dutch Dave.

The negro glanced again at Gentleman Jack who ordered:

"Do as I tell you!"

Then arose a perfect chorus of yells:

"Yes, hit him!"

"Knock them both out in one round!"

"It's your chip in, nigger."

"Shoot 'em, don't hart 'em!"

"Give it to him squar' in ther eyes!"

"Break his jaw!"

"Go in nig and win!"

"It's your play, darkie!"

"You've got trumps, black man!"

"Red Sombrero will back you, so let drive!"

"It will do 'em good!"

These cries from men who had never dared raise their voices against them, showed the two desperadoes how the crowd was against them, and did much to cower them.

"Yas, darkie, they made you use your legs, so now use yer hands ag'in 'em!" cried a loud voice.

The negro drew back and let drive his fist full into the face of Irish Pat, who in vain tried to dodge the blow.

"A mule kicked him!" shouted a man, as Irish Pat rolled over in the dust.

"Now the other!"

And Dutch Dave felt the heavy fist strike his face and went backward to join his comrade.

Then came the command in a voice all heard:

"Now go! but I live at Kate's Kitchen whenever you wish to find me!"

Both men were cowed by his revolvers, they were half dazed by the blow, and, bleeding, they staggered to their feet and walked away, while Gentleman Jack returned to the piazza, his face flushing as he beheld the pretty face of Lady Kate at the window, and by her side one whom he knew must be Gambler Lou, and felt that they had seen all.

CHAPTER XXXII.

KEEN KIT MYSTIFIED.

"THAT man has cut out for himself more than he can handle, I think, and we law-respecting men of Hallelujah ought to back him up," said one of the crowd, as Gentleman Jack reentered the hotel to avoid the crowd by going to his rooms.

"Yes, but few will dare chip in yet, until they see what the rest of the wild element will have to say, for they will be sure to try him on again to-night as sure as he goes into the Queen of Hearts Saloon," replied another.

"Yes, and wipe him out, and then we'll get into trouble."

"Better lie low until we see if he handles the rest of 'em, and then will come our time to shout."

"That's so; but he may turn out to be as great a fellow as Bandbox Bill was."

"Yes, the Bravo in Broadcloth made Hallelujah seem like a Sunday-school picnic."

"Wonder whatever became of him?"

"Don't know; but I do not believe another man can do what he could in the way of making the toughs take a back seat."

"No, but there is music in this man with the Red Sombrero, if he don't get out of tune."

This conversation will show the drift of opinion about Gentleman Jack with the better element, while another from a different source will prove that he had made foes as well as friends.

They were a hard-looking lot, half a dozen who soon congregated together at one end of the piazza, to talk over what had occurred.

"Now, pards," said one, as a feeler.

"It strikes me thet Red Top are a leetle too previous."

"Yas, he's so fresh he will spile ef he hain't salted down," another responded.

"Thet's so, and smokin' with gunpowder will help him."

"He went in pretty rough on Dave and Pat."

"Waal now he did; but he are some circus feller as has got out of a job and wanted ter show off."

"Waal, it hain't in order fer no tenderfoot ter run Hallelujah."

"Nary time, are it."

"He will have ter be sot on."

"He will."

"Wonder if he plays keerds."

"I guesses so."

"Waal, we'll see him ter-night at ther Queen's."

"And we'll rope him inter a game and do him."

"You bet we will, only I wants ter keep out o' reach o' his arm."

"Thet's so; but how about ther nigger?"

"Oh, he can't stay in Hallelujah, unless he places hash in Kate's Kitchen, fer thar hain't no place fer his color in Hallelujah whar he comes ter dig fer dust."

"No, he'll hev ter go; but what are Dave and Pat a-goin' ter do about this Gentleman Jack?"

"They'll be on hand ter-night, never fear, at ther Queen's, and then they'll have a say, and we'll be thar ter chip in, fer Hallelujah won't be no good for we fellers ef we can't run it to our likin', pards."

This advice seemed to meet with general approbation and the party dispersed, but they were less noisy than it was their wont to be.

There were others who said nothing.

Their sympathy was all with the stranger, and they hoped he could hold his own.

But until he did they dared not take sides with him, and by their silence really aided the rough element of the camps, though against their will.

Lady Kate was delighted, and Kit Keen remarked that it was like old times when Band-box Bill, the Bravo in Broadcloth, had made the desperadoes make tracks out of Hallelujah society.

After some talk with Lady Kate and Gambler Lou, as darkness had fallen, Keen Kit decided to go up to the room of Gentleman Jack and ask him to go over to the Queen of Hearts Saloon with him.

He knew that if the stranger did not shobe himself there, the roughs would at once say we was afraid to come.

To his surprise he saw considerable luggage in the room.

He knew it was not there when he and the stranger had gone down to supper.

How had it gotten there?

Gentleman Jack had come upon his cotch with precious little baggage, and here were several elegant serapes, any one of which was worth a hundred in gold, some clothing, an extra pair of boots, moccasins, several suits of clothes, with sombreros and extra belts of arms.

"Pard Jack, be you a traveling peddler?" he asked, as he took a survey of the things.

"Oh no, Kit, I am only assorting my wardrobe," replied Gentleman Jack, with a smile.

"How on 'arth did it all git here?"

"Oh, I have a way of getting what I want, Kit, as you will see, only do not speak of the outfit you have seen."

"I'm as dumb about it as a stiff three days deceased, pard."

"But I wants ter take yer over to ther Queen's ter-night."

"You'll have to excuse me to-night, Kit."

"Pard, you must go."

"Excuse me, Kit."

"They'll be thar!"

"Who?"

"The Twins."

"I am sorry to miss their society, but must decline."

"Say, pard, all the toughs in the camps will be thar."

"What a treat I'll miss!"

"But they'll say you is skeered."

"Well, I'll have a chance to disprove the assertion some other time."

"You'll not go, then?"

"You must excuse me, Kit, for I have a great deal to do to-night; but if I need you, will I find you at the Queen of Hearts Saloon?"

"I'll be thar, Pard Jack, and if yer needs me, send over," and Kit left, still in a quandary about the luggage in the stranger's room, and also that he should refuse such temptations as he had held out to him to go to the saloon of Gambler Lou.

He at once sought Lady Kate and told her about it, and then asked her, as a secret, when Gentleman Jack's baggage had arrived, and how.

Lady Kate knew nothing about its arrival and was as much amazed as Kit.

She questioned her servants, but they were also ignorant on the subject, and Kit said:

"Thar's su'thin' myster'us about him, more so than was the Bravo in Broadcloth."

"I'm a-thinkin' he's a magician and is a-goin' ter give a show in Hallelujah."

Then Kit started for the saloon, to come upon two strangers who had just then dismounted before Kate's Kitchen.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

STRANGERS IN HALLELUJAH.

"PARD, do you think we can get lodgings here?" one of the strangers asked Kit as they saw him come out upon the piazza, which was now deserted, for the crowd had adjourned to the saloon of the Queen of Hearts.

"You bet you kin, pard, and the best in the land."

"Jist come right in and I'll interduce yer ter Lady Kate."

"What might be your cognomens?"

Kit prided himself upon his introductions, and here was a chance he could not allow to slip by.

He saw before him two men who had the appearance of scouts, and they were well mounted and had a pack-horse, heavily loaded, with them.

One was a small, wiry-looking man of small

size, with intensely black eyes and hair, the latter worn long.

The other was a man of fine physique, dressed as the other was in buckskin, and with sombrero looped up in front with a pin, which was a gold star set with red stones.

"My name down in Texas where I hail from is Buckskin Sam, and my pard answers to the handle of Colorado Carl, so now let us get hold of your cognomen, pard, for we rather like the cut of your face."

"Waal, I are Kit Keene, rechristened Keen Kit, and I drives the Overland buss atween Glory Hallelujah City and Devil's Den, two as onarary places fer ther exhibition o' ther cussedness o' mankind as man ever seen."

"Ter interduce myself more properly, I'll say I got a bullet inter my shoulder in ther run in ter-day, and were saved by the best chip o' manhood I ever seen and we knows him here as Gentleman Jack."

The strangers seemed glad to meet Kit, shook hands, and after taking their horses around to the stable entered the hotel and were properly introduced to Lady Kate, who sent them to pleasant rooms and ordered supper for them.

Then Kit left them after an invitation for them to look in later at the Queen of Hearts Saloon.

Upon his arrival there Kit was surprised to see the crowd.

A look of disappointment was upon every face, as he entered without Gentleman Jack, and after he had taken his place at a card-table several asked him where his friend was, to all which queries he replied that he was busy and would not be in.

Then the rough element began to gibe at the stranger in many ways, and later Dutch Dave and Irish Pat put in an appearance.

"Whar's yer pard, Kit?" asked Dutch Dave, as they advanced toward the table where the driver sat.

"He hed biz thet wouldn't let him come."

"Waal, we is painful sorry, for as he got ther better o' us ter-day we thought as how we might ring him in on a game o' keerds ter even up—Hello! thar is ther niggur, and he's got ter play keerds, or fight."

The negro stood over against the wall, and had come in quietly almost unseen.

There were several others there, but they played on a table to themselves, as did the Indians who came there to gamble, the Chinese and the Mexicans.

The rest all played together at any of the tables.

"What in thunder did yer come in here fur?" asked Kit of the negro.

"Boss, we is free now, and I heerd how niggurs c'd play a game o' keerds here, sah, so I comed in."

"Thar hain't no harm in it, black pard, only I fears yer has got inter a mess."

"I'll play de gemmans if dey wishes ter play square, fer I don't hold no bad feelin' ag'in 'em fer this arternoon—I is satisfied."

"Yer hain't sich a fool as yer looks, black pard."

"What are yer name?" asked Kit.

"Poker, sah."

"Ahl waal, ef yer plays with them two chips o' pizen it are yer own funeral," and Kit kept his eye on the negro, who was now approached by the Twins.

"Say, Blackie, we wants ter even up on a game o' keerds with yer," said Dutch Dave, whose face was cut and swollen from its contact with the negro's fist.

"Yas, Coon, we wants ter invite ther pleasure of your company ter a little game o' poker," and Irish Pat's face showed up badly disfigured after his rough handling.

"All right, boss, I is willin', so yer don't jump onter me ef I wins, fer I plays a pretty good game."

The manner of the negro was polite, but not subdued, and he had nothing of the brag against him, while he did appear to be fully satisfied with the revenge he had had on the two bullies.

"Waal, Coon, we plays a squar' game, but plays ter win, but we puts up more'n you kin chip in, I guesses."

"No, boss, I hain't broke."

"Kin yer put up a cool half-hundred as a starter?"

"Yas, boss."

"Waal, show yer dust and we plays, though I is sorry yer hain't no partner."

"Ef it's ther same to ther nigger and yerselves, pards, I are willin' ter play a leetle hand as his pard, fer I hes sold my pelts and has ther dust fer 'em right in heur," and the speaker slapped his hand upon the breast-pocket of his blanket coat.

All eyes had turned upon him, for no one had seen him come in, or noticed him particularly at least.

He was an odd-looking character, of large frame, but with a stoop in his form, and something of a hump on his back; he had become so round-shouldered from following trails, doubtless.

He wore moccasins, leggings and a blanket coat, with a broad-brimmed slouch hat which

was so limber from long use that it drooped over his face and upon his shoulders.

His hair was gray, his beard would have been white had it not been so soiled, and it was evidently quite long, as the end of it was stuck into his hunting-shirt.

His face looked like leather, and iron-rimmed spectacles shielded his eyes.

An old-fashioned rifle and pair of revolvers were his weapons, with the addition of a bowie-knife with a buck's horn.

"Who in all ther snakes o' Ireland might you be?" said Irish Pat, after a look at the queer stranger.

"Old Scalper Sam, at yer sarvice, pard," was the quiet response of the stranger.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE "CRIMSON STARS" ON THE TRAIL.

THERE was no braver band of men ever left a frontier fort, than Captain Alf Taylor, his Lieutenant Ames, Surgeon Powell and thirty troopers.

They went prepared for the event, should they have to face it, and to rescue Heloise Hembold if it was to be done.

They went fitted out to camp for weeks if need be, and the colonel alone knew where to find them by courier when wanted.

Surgeon Powell was also to be the scout of the Boys in Blue, and he alone knew the trails where he could find Buffalo Bill when they needed to communicate with him, or to consolidate with him and his scouts.

The retreat sought by the Boys in Blue, was a secluded valley in the mountains.

It was just large enough to support the horses for a few weeks, there was good water, plenty of timber, and around on all sides from the ridge a grand view could be obtained.

There was a goodly number of pack-mules in the outfit, so that the men would lack for nothing, and they soon had the camp in excellent shape.

"Nick," the captain's servant was a fine cook, and the three officers meant to fare well while waiting for a call from Buffalo Bill.

The latter, with his scouts, had struck the Overland trail, and intended patrolling it, and its branches, gradually working down toward Hallelujah City which Buffalo Bill and Surgeon Powell looked upon as the hotbed of lawlessness, and where they felt sure a trail might be struck to lead them to the outlaw retreat.

"If they expected the secret aid of the Texan ranchero, Mortimer Bainbridge, it must come from the way of Hallelujah they felt assured."

Buffalo Bill moved out in good condition, the pack-animals being horses to be used if needed.

He had with him as his right bower Wild Bill, his friend in any emergency, and Texas Jack and Captain Jack Crawford as allies, so that the quartette was a strong one indeed.

Then there were six other scouts, who, like the Boys in Blue under Captain Alfred Taylor, had been picked for their worth, endurance and daring.

The retreat to which the scouts went was all of seventy miles from the military camp, and about sixty from the outlaw retreat.

From there to Hallelujah City it was over thirty miles, while the trails could be easily followed by the scouts.

So the camp was established in a quiet nook in the mountains, convenient to the trails, and two troopers with Surgeon Powell returned to the military camp, while three scouts who had gone with the soldiers, to get the locality of such encampment, went to their respective commands.

"I'll tell you, Bill, we must take a run down into Hallelujah City, and let the Texan know we are at hand, for he will either be there, or have some one there who will know us," Buffalo Bill had said after having been several days in camp.

"Yes, it will be a good idea, and I think you had better send for Surgeon Powell to join us."

"Then two of us can go there, two more be near on the trail, and Jack Crawford can command here, ready for word from us," responded Wild Bill.

"Then you mean the four shall be you and I, Surgeon Powell and Texas Jack?"

"I don't know a stronger team, Buffalo, if I say so, as I should not, being one of 'em," was Wild Bill's response.

"Yes, we will be a strong team, and all of us know Hallelujah City pretty well."

"Then send after the Surgeon Scout at once, for we seem to be only waiting here for the trap to be sprung."

Buffalo Bill called to a scout and told him to prepare for the ride to Captain Taylor's command.

By him he sent a note to Surgeon Frank Powell, telling him that no outlaws had been seen, and the plan was for four of them to go to Hallelujah City on a scout, and he was needed as one of the quartette.

The scout departed well mounted, and being one of those who knew the way to the military camp, he made a rapid ride of it, for he returned the next afternoon with the Surgeon Scout.

Then the plan was talked over, and the Sur-

geon Scout was more than willing for the run to Hallelujah City.

He also reported that they had not seen a trace of the Toll-Takers, and the several coaches they had halted reported that they had come through without being stopped.

Captain Jack Crawford was accordingly placed in command of the scouts in the camp, with directions to keep two men scouting each day on the trails, and report both to Buffalo Bill at Hallelujah City, and to Captain Taylor at his camp, any discoveries that might be made by them of importance.

The next morning the four friends started upon the trail to Hallelujah City, and they all wore in their hats the crimson stars sent them by the Texan ranchero.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE CAPTIVE'S ONLY HOPE.

WHEN the Mexican outlaw arrived at his retreat with his captive, Heloise was surprised to see how thoroughly well they had fitted themselves up.

The cabin which had been the one where dwelt Major Mephisto was to be her quarters, in company with the beautiful outlaws' decoy, Cleo Amidon, who had been very reserved toward her upon the ride to the retreat.

Now, as they entered the cabin, she turned to Heloise with one of her sweet smiles, and said:

"Now you are to be my guest, Miss Hembold, and I trust we may live together in peace, if not happiness, for I will do all in my power for your comfort and to relieve the tedium of your captivity.

"Come; shall we patch up a friendship between us, which I feel for you, though I have forfeited your regard?"

"I have no desire to render myself uncomfortable by ill-humor, so we can at least be friendly toward each other; but you will not find that I regard you or Monte, the Mexican, with other than a feeling of having been cruelly wronged by both of you.

"As his tool I will not regard you so severely as I do—your master."

The decoy did not lose her pleasant smile at this, but returned:

"Well, let us get settled at once, and we will have some pleasant rides and walks together.

"There is good fishing in the streams, plenty of game, and both of us are crack-shots, as I know, and the timber and valley are full of wild flowers.

"Then, too, I brought a guitar with me, and you know we learned some very pretty duets together at the fort, and, for other music, Chief Monte sings well and there are several of the band who play and have good voices as well.

"I have some books, too, a couple of hammocks to get lazy in, and altogether you will not find life here unendurable, I am sure."

"And how long do you expect to hold me captive here?" quietly asked the prisoner.

"That rests wholly with the chief."

"Does he think that he can mold me to his will?"

"You know best."

"That I would so lower myself to become his wife, when I deem the kinship he holds to me a curse hard to bear."

The eyes of the decoy sparkled, and she remarked:

"You do not love him, then?"

"Love him? I hate him, I loathe him, despise, abhor, detest, shrink from him with more dread than I feel for a snake, or other venomous reptile."

There was no mistaking these words, and Cleo was charmed to feel that they were sincere and in earnest, for she had been a trifle jealous of Heloise.

If she could only get Monte Miranda to feeling the same way toward Heloise, she would be happy, for she had dreaded that he might change toward her and cast her off, once he had wedded his cousin.

True, she knew that she had the prior claim, as far as a Mormon marriage went; but would that hold good outside of Utah Territory?

Might not Monte, who was an avowed Mormon, also have other wives?

All this troubled Cleo more than she cared to admit, yet she was glad to feel that in Heloise she had at least no willing rival.

But she would wait and watch her husband, keeping his secret just so long as he meant to be true to her.

That Heloise was to be sacrificed, troubled her but little.

She would, if all went as Monte, the Mexican, predicted it would, have vast riches, and she and the man she now madly loved could go to other lands and be happy, unmindful of the thorns their course had driven into the hearts of others.

That evening, at supper, the Mexican joined them, with an apology to Heloise for doing so.

"I was in hopes that I should not have to see much of you, Cousin Monte," she replied.

"Well, I will take my meals with you, and after you have had a chance to consider my proposal for a few days, I will come for an answer."

"I beg pardon, but what was your proposal?" she asked, languidly.

"To marry me, so that we could go to Mexico and claim our inheritance."

"This venison steak is really excellent, Cousin Monte— Oh! but I interrupted you when you were saying something about our fortune in Mexico."

The man uttered an oath mentally, but hiding his anger, said:

"Yes, and I will pledge myself to let you leave Mexico, after you have transferred your share to the United States, and bring an action for divorce against me, for desertion, cruelty, or any charge you may deem advisable."

"That will free you from me utterly."

"Yes, I suppose so; but can you tell whatever became of that very handsome chief of yours, Captain Branch Bainbridge?"

"Was he not hanged when this retreat was taken?" quickly asked the Mexican.

"No, I did not see them hang him, and it was said that he and his sister, the Woman in Black, escaped?"

"Well, I believed him dead, and hoped the woman was too, for I hated her most sincerely."

"You surprise me by saying that they escaped, and I regret it, too."

"Yes, for the Danite chief was a master to dread, I know, and should he turn up now, you would have to take second place."

"Never! I would kill him first!" was the savage reply.

"It strikes me that he had had considerable experience in the killing business, too," said Heloise, wickedly.

After supper, she retired early, and though very tired, could not sleep for a long while, for she saw plainly that the only hope she had of escape was through Buffalo Bill and his allies, the soldiers, coming to her rescue as before.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

SCALPER SAM AS A POKER-PLAYER.

THE proposition of the old man who called himself Scalper Sam, to play poker as the partner of the negro who had given the name of Poker as his own, was greeted by the Twins with a loud and rude laugh, while Kit said:

"Waal, ef they'd only ring in a Chinese and an Injun too, with thet pair o' twin Satans, it would be a game I'd like ter see."

"Maybe you do not think I has ther dust, pard?" said Scalper Sam.

"Waal, yer look raythur dusty," said Irish Pat, with a laugh at what he considered a very smart remark on his part.

But the laugh was turned upon him by Scalper Sam, who returned:

"Waal, you jist be keerful, pilgrim, ter keep ther dust out o' your eyes while ye'r playing with me."

"All right, old man, I'll go yer."

"Me, too, for all yer has," said Dutch Dave.

"And you don't object, coon?" and Scalper Sam turned upon the negro.

"No, boss, I is glad o' yer comp'ny, sah, fer I likes old folks."

"What did yer say yer name were, pard?" asked Irish Pat.

"Scalper Sam."

"What did yer git thet name fer?"

"Fer thes!"

And the old man held up a string of scalps that hung at his belt.

"Thar be jist forty-eight o' em thar, pards, and I are a-hopin' ter make ther string fifty afore long."

There was something so uncanny in the look and words of the old trapper that many in even that hardened crowd shuddered.

Then several remembered that they had heard the name before, and how an old hermit lived in the Rocky Mountains spending his years upon a trail of revenge alone against Indians and outlaws.

The Twins had heard of him, too, but they were perfectly willing to play with him if he had the money to put up, and Irish Pat said:

"Scalps hain't money, pard, so show up yer dust, or shet up."

"Waal, thet talks," was the answer, and Scalper Sam threw down upon the table a buckskin belt heavy with gold, adding:

"Thar be a thousand good dollars thar, pilgrims, and it is ter risk ter make more, or lose."

"All right; and maybe yer has more in thet hump on yer back."

And Irish Pat again laughed rudely.

"Maybe so; and ef I hain't, I hev lead in these weepens o' mine, and they shoot straight ef they do be like the'r pard, a leetle old-fashioned."

"I planks down a hundred fer chips as a starter, so who covers?"

"Me do, boss."

And the negro laid down a hundred dollars, which he took from some receptacle in his apparel, but just where no one had observed.

The Twins then put up their money, and the fair banker Gambler Lou, gave them the ivory chips and cards, less five per cent. for her fee.

Then the four sat down at the table, and a queer four they were in appearance.

The crowd had mostly gathered around them, and, soon after the game began, the two scouts,

Colorado Carl and Buckskin Sam, drew near and stood by the side of Kit Keene, who was deeply interested in the playing, and really disappointed that Gentleman Jack was not there to see what Hallelujah City could show up in the way of curious goings-on.

Poker had not overrated himself when he said he played a good game, for the negro held good hands from the first, and the money went his way in a steady stream.

The Twins were beginning to look more ugly than was their wont, when fickle fortune changed and they began to win.

Scalper Sam had held bad hands throughout, and only the negro's luck had saved him from losing heavily.

His bad luck stuck to him of course when the Twins began to win, and Irish Pat said sneeringly:

"Yer kin rake in scalps, old man, better than yer kin winning keerds."

"Thet's so sometimes, pilgrim," was the answer, and he added:

"I hev a leetle yaller metal left yet, and maybe luck may change, for the night are young yet."

"Yas, but when luck roosts on me and my pard it are likely ter stay thar until sunrise, so you and the nigger goes broke sart'in."

"Thet are so, ef we played on with you, for see, yer hes jist raked in ther pile on four aces, and two of 'em were tuk from yer sleeve fer ther occas'in, so hand that coon back his money, all of it!"

The situation was a striking one, for the old man had talked slowly until he suddenly dropped a derringer from each sleeve into his hands and covered The Twins, his elbows on the table, and each eye glancing along a barrel, which was aimed at the head.

The Twins were fairly caught and dared not move, and the old man said quietly:

"Are there any gent here as will examine them pilgrims and see ef I hain't shoutin' ther truth, for they has extra keerds in the'r sleeves and has used 'em expert too all along ther game, only I didn't keer ter lose ther fun o' watchin' 'em by showin' up the'r game?"

"I'll examine this man's sleeves, sir," and the man who stepped forward to the side of Irish Pat was Buckskin Sam.

"And I'll search the gent from Germany," and Colorado Carl stepped to that worthy's side.

"Say, pards o' Hallelujah, be our town ter be run by strangers?" yelled Irish Pat, and his voice roared through the room and he made a motion to rise, and was warned by the look in the old man's face to keep still.

"No it hain't and we stands by yer," yelled a voice, and nearly a dozen men moved over to the rear of The Twins, and a glance showed that they were the worst roughs of the camps.

Quickly the better men fell back and aside, for they felt there was going to be trouble.

"S'arch them keerd-sharps, pards, and show 'em up!" said Scalper Sam rising, but still keeping his derringers leveled.

Then, how it was done, no one knew, but a quick movement of his hands let the derringers slip up his sleeve and a revolver was in each hand in a second.

"Thet looks like business, or I is a coyote," shouted Kit Keene, and he stood on one side of the old man, while Poker, the negro, arose on the other, with Colorado Carl and Buckskin Sam by The Twins, their hands upon their shoulders.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

NOT SUCH A FOOL AS HE LOOKED.

THE situation was a thrilling one, there in that mining-camp saloon, where were gathered three hundred men, and two women.

Those two were Gambler Lou, the fair proprietress of the establishment, handsome, well dressed, refined-faced and resolute.

Her face paled as she sat upon her raised seat behind her "bank" at the end of the saloon, but she spoke not a word.

Lady Kate was her constant companion, and passed nearly every evening in the saloon with her.

She too whitened under an expected tragedy before their eyes, but neither flinched.

The better element were on the *qui vive*, afraid to take sides, but hoping that The Twins and some of their pals would be wiped out, whatever became of old Scalper Sam, the negro and the two scouts.

Keen Kit was the only one who had the nerve to take sides with those he knew were right, and he had removed his wounded arm from its sling to prepare for emergencies.

"If Gentleman Jack were only here now," he muttered, and there were others who longed for the presence of the man with the red sombrero, feeling assured that the evil element of Hallelujah City would then and there get a set-back that would be a most salutary lesson to them.

In his absence they, therefore, had high hopes of the man who had forty-eight scalps to his belt, and had hinted that he would like to make the string half a hundred.

They only hoped he would be successful in this praiseworthy desire by adding the scalps of

Irish Pat and Dutch Dave, with a chance of swelling the number over the half hundred.

So matters stood when Scalper Sam's quick change of derringers for revolvers riveted every eye, for it was executed as a sleight-of-hand performer might do it.

At his request to search The Twins, Buckskin Sam and Colorado Carl did so in no gentle manner, and with a dispatch and thoroughness that seemed to indicate practice in that style of work.

The result was the display of extra high cards held by each desperado.

"They didn't find 'em! It's a put-up job, fer they hed 'em in their arm-sleeves ter play it on us thet we cheated."

"They is pards o' thet old sinner!" roared Irish Pat.

But nine out of every ten men had seen that the cards were found on The Twins, though their backers were determined to make a bold stand to protect them, and the leader called out:

"It's a put-up job on Ther Twins, pards, and I says we percepts 'em."

"It is cheaper acting than talkin', pard," Scalper Sam said, and he stood at bay, while Buckskin Sam and Colorado Carl quickly stepped back on a line with him, the negro and Kit.

The Twins still kept their seats, and wisely, too, for the old man had them covered; but behind them were their backers, a cool dozen of desperate men, all with their hands upon their hips.

The situation was appalling, for a movement might cost half a dozen lives.

This Scalper Sam saw, and so he said, appealing to the crowd:

"Pards, I wants ter say yer has seen what these men did ter cheat thet poor darky, not speakin' o' myself, and it would be better fer ther camps fer yer ter take these men out and try 'em."

"It would save bloodshed, and many lives, mine among t'others, fer I intends ter play this game to ther end, now I has drawn my hand."

"If yer who is honest refuses ter take these men out and try 'em decent, and then hang 'em—fer they is guilty o' many crimes—then I intends ter make 'em give up every dollar they has won by cheatin', or die right here; for, as I said afore, I wants two more scalps."

"And I backs yer, old pard," loudly said Keen Kit.

"We are here to stay with you, pard, until the curtain falls," Buckskin Sam added.

"Boss, I is by yer side ter fight or run, as yer gives ther word," cried Poker.

"And we are here ter back you up, pards, and don't yer ferget that we counts three ter one," said the leader of the desperadoes.

Then one of the crowd of miners was heard to speak, for he, with others, began to feel that right there they should act if they wished law to rule lawlessness.

"Pards, I move that we send into the hotel for a stranger who came into our camps to-day, and has shown himself worthy of taking the lead."

"He is Keen Kit's friend, and the friend of the negro there, so can speak, and if he says hang those men, I say we must back him up and do it."

"Kit, will you go after your friend, Gentleman Jack, and tell him we have elected him judge of a mining-camp court? for I believe that those who love order here will agree with me."

"What say you, friends?"

As he ceased speaking the miner turned toward the large crowd for response.

The backers of The Twins felt that they should have acted more promptly and fired at once, for then they would have held possession and terrorized the community as they had often done before.

But, somehow, Scalper Sam had held them in check by his nerve, and now they dared not make a break, for if the crowd was aroused against them they would suffer the penalty of those they sought to protect in their crime.

Now they grew uneasy, yet still held their position behind The Twins.

The crowd, in response to the miner who had boldly given his opinion, backing his views with his hand upon his hip where his revolver was strapped, gave a shout in response that made The Twins turn pale as death, for with a roar came the words:

"Let Gentleman Jack settle it!"

"Gentlemen, as Gentleman Jack is to decide the fate of these two men, let me say that he is here—I am Gentleman Jack!"

With the words, the old trapper towered to his full height, off came his blanket-coat with its hump, and a gray wig went with the old hat and spectacles, revealing the handsome face of Gentleman Jack.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

GENTLEMAN JACK'S BOLD STAND.

THE amazement of the crowd in the saloon of the Queen of Hearts arose to fever-heat at the

startling discovery of the stranger playing the part of Scalper Sam.

Kit halloed so loudly that many thought he had been drinking, and cheer after cheer rung out from the better class of citizens.

Lady Kate and Gambler Lou breathed more freely, and the color came back into their faces again.

A general feeling fell upon all that this stranger, this mysterious man who had come to Hallelujah City under flying colors as a hero, intended to put his foot firmly upon the neck of the lawless.

Who he was no one cared, and had they been asked no one could tell.

It was certain that he came for the side of right, and it was a subject of congratulation, for had such a man been arrayed on the side of the desperate element, then indeed would Hallelujah City have become a home of terror.

When at last order had been restored, the stranger turned quietly toward the crowd.

He was perfectly cool, but presented a strange appearance, for his own long dark hair had been fastened up to allow of the gray wig being put on, and his beard had been whitened to accord with the hair.

His face was lined and darkened, and as his spectacles no longer concealed his magnificent eyes, he stood revealed in all his grandeur of manhood.

A belt with weapons was about his slender waist, but also it was seen that he held a revolver in each hand, and up his sleeves a couple of derringers had disappeared.

"Gentlemen, as you decided to send for me to try this case, an honor I appreciate, permit me to say, I naturally had to reveal myself under the disguise of Scalper Sam."

"Some days ago I came upon a man dying by the roadside, and he had sunk there, after having escaped death from the fire of two men who had sought to kill and rob him."

"They supposed they had missed him, but their aim had been only too true, and in the darkness he had escaped them, to later lay down to die."

"The men had passed near him, and he had heard their names, for they called each other Dutch Dave and Irish Pat."

"I remained by the side of the old man until he died."

"He had moved to the frontier long years before with his family, and all of them had been massacred one night by a band of white outlaws and Indians."

"From that day he became an avenger, and he had vowed to reap vengeance tenfold for each one of those slain."

"He had killed his fifty, having forty-eight scalps, losing the scalp-locks of two who fell into a river when shot."

"Here is his string of scalps, and these are some of his clothes I wear to-night."

"He was on his way to take the stage-coach and die in his old home, and he had with him a bag of gold, twelve hundred dollars, all he had in the world."

"This money I have ready to send through to an address he gave me, and when he died I buried him decently."

"His name was Scalper Sam, and to catch these two men I rigged up as the old man."

"I had trouble with two men of the names he gave this afternoon, and I would ask if there are others who bear the same, for if so, I may be mistaken," and Gentleman Jack looked placidly at the two desperadoes, who sat silent and white-faced regarding him.

The stand which the people had taken in favor of Gentleman Jack kept the backers of the two quiet, for they knew the crowd was in a humor to wipe out all the roughs in the camps, and the stranger had only to hint such a thing to start them at it.

"Now, gentlemen, it rests with you to decide if these two men are to still keep up a reign of terror in your midst, for I have nothing to do with their punishment, not being a resident here, unless they cross my path!"

The crowd answered with thundering voice:

"Hang them!"

The two men sprung to their feet, and in desperation drew their revolvers, and in an instant would have opened upon the crowd.

But there came two sharp, quick reports before they could do so, and their weapons dropped from their hands, for the bullets from Gentleman Jack's pistol had pierced the arms of the desperadoes, showing splendid skill as a marksman.

Then the crowd rushed for the two men, but Gentleman Jack sprung before them and said:

"Back all of you! I have punished them, and so give them an hour to leave the camps, under penalty of death if they return."

"Is there a surgeon here to dress their wounds?"

No one answered the call and Gentleman Jack continued:

"Then I will dress their wounds and then they must go."

"Hang them!" cried many voices.

"I say no, for a wounded man shall not be strung up with my consent," and he led the men from the saloon into the hotel, while Kit,

Buckskin Sam, Colorado Carl and Poker closed in behind him to keep the infuriated crowd back, for now that there was no longer fear of the two men there were many who wanted them hanged.

As for their dozen backers, they had quietly slipped to the background, knowing how dangerous it was to raise a voice in favor of the two culprits in the faces of over three hundred thoroughly-aroused men who had long submitted in silence to their bravado and lawlessness.

Gentleman Jack took the men at once to his rooms, and Poker was sent to Lady Kate for warm water, bandages and all needful for dressing their wounds.

The two scouts, Colorado Carl and Buckskin Sam, with Kit Keen and Poker, stood guard at the doors of the rooms to keep back the noisy shriekers for the gore of Irish Pat and Dutch Dave, who were now thoroughly frightened at the storm that was bearing down upon them.

When he had all ready to dress their wounds, Gentleman Jack went about it in the coolest manner possible, not at all flurried by the commotion outside.

"Men, let me say to you that I know you to richly deserve hanging, and, but for the fact that I was forced to wound you to prevent your firing madly into the crowd, I would not have raised a hand to save you from being strung up to a tree."

"I could have killed you and won favor by doing so, but I did not wish your lives on my hands."

"After wounding you, then I looked upon you as men who were down, and I protect such a man, no matter who or what he may be."

"I tried to disarm you, and these wounds are severe, but not dangerous, and I will dress them for you and then see you on your way out of the camps in safety."

"Yer can never do it agin' that mad crowd o' devils, pard," said Irish Pat.

"Yes, I can protect you; but you must not leave to-night."

"I will keep you here until morning, and then I drive Kit's stage out, so will take you along."

"If you have anything in your camp you wish to take, you had better let me send some one after it."

"Pard, ther hain't a thing but our traps, fer our dust we carries on us fer fear o' accidents."

"All right; you can have a room next door until morning, and then take the coach."

"See here, pard; I have my own arm in a sling, and these two ducks wid me be in ther same fix; so hain't it bad luck ter carry three galoots along all shooted in the arm?" said Kit, dubiously.

"I'll risk the bad luck there is in it, Kit; but I have promised to give these men their lives if they will leave the camps, and I will protect them; so go among the crowd and try and cool them down, for I wish no trouble with them."

Kit hastily obeyed, and went down among the angry men, who were shouting for the lives of the two desperadoes.

They had them in their power, and, wounded or not, they meant to hang them.

"But you left it to ther gent ter decide, pards, as ter what should be did with 'em," urged Kit.

"Wal, we decides now fer ourselves, and they hangs; yes, and every other feller in Hallelujah who dares ter put on airs," was the reply.

And the words were greeted with a howl of satisfaction.

In vain did Kit, Lady Kate and Gambler Lou argue; the now maddening crowd were determined, and the Overland driver returned to report the situation to Gentleman Jack, who said, calmly:

"I shall protect them, Kit."

CHAPTER XXXIX.

TO FACE A MOB.

THE bold stand taken by Gentleman Jack in favor of the two desperadoes did not exactly please Kit, the Overland driver, but he would not say so, and more, he intended to stand by him in what he did.

Kit could not see why the two men should not hang, for he had not that nice sense of chivalry which prompted the stranger, having wounded the men, not to have them further persecuted.

As for the two scouts, Buckskin Sam and Colorado Carl, they took matters with the utmost coolness all around.

They had placed themselves upon the side of law and order, and they intended to stand by their act.

Buckskin Sam, as a Texan Ranger, also held an official office, yet made no show of it, and Colorado Carl was ready for whatever turned up.

Poker was there, too, and a fearless fellow he was, though he had realized his helplessness when opposed to the two desperadoes and wisely danced at their command.

The blows he had given them, and the position they were then in, was revenge enough for him, and he was ready to stand by Gentleman Jack in protecting them.

The two men, now thoroughly frightened, and

wholly dependent upon the stranger they had hated and plotted against, were ready to obey his slightest wish.

They were put into a room near and laid down, but not to sleep, for their pain and fright drove all thought of slumber from their eyes.

They knew that the miners were aroused, and that to save themselves those confederates in crime whom they had depended upon were not willing to help them now.

They had quickly quieted down when they saw the odds against them, and the only hope Irish Pat and Dutch Dave had now, they fully understood, was in Gentleman Jack.

Would he be equal to the situation, they wondered, for they knew he would have to face hundreds of men thirsting for their blood, now that their power had waned.

The scouts were given rooms near the stranger, in the same wing, and Keen Kit's quarters were also there when he was in Hallelujah City, and the only means of entrance was by the private stairs through the office.

It was in this wing that Lady Kate had her own sitting and bedroom, and the apartments of Gambler Lou adjoined hers.

True, all was rough and crude, yet there was an air of comfort to the place not often found on the border.

The dining-hall was beneath this wing, and on the other side of the large office space was the wing where the rooms were small, above and below stairs, and the ordinary guests of Kate's Kitchen occupied them.

The scouts retired to their room, and Kit to his, to throw themselves down fully dressed, ready for any emergency.

Poker was given a blanket on the floor in one of the strangers' rooms and was soon fast asleep, while Scotty the clerk was told to give ample warning if the crowd intended making any demonstration to take the desperadoes out and hang them.

Thus the hours passed away, the miners drinking heavily and becoming more and more boisterous and determined to hang the two men.

At last they became so infuriated that one of the dozen backers happening to come into the saloon, against the advice of his fellows, was set upon at once.

Brought to bay he drew his revolver, and though he shot one man he was riddled with bullets.

It was now about dawn, and Kit called down from a window to his stablemen to have his team ready within an hour.

Gentleman Jack had slept peacefully until aroused by Kit's knock at his door.

"Pard, about a hundred of 'em are outside yet, full to the neck o' rum, and they've got a rope all ready ter hang 'em with."

"Kit, I don't wish to get you into trouble, and I will tell you to keep out of it; but I will pay for two seats on your coach this morning, and put my men aboard."

"Those men last night said they would abide by my decision, and when I shot those fellows it was to save life, for in their desperation they would have emptied their revolvers into the crowd."

"Now as they are wounded and are forced to leave the camp, let that be their punishment, and I shall protect them from greater."

"When we have breakfast I am ready to start, and I will bring my men openly to the front door of the hotel."

"Pard, yer has got more sand than any one man I ever seen, and I'll be thar when needed."

"Breakfast are ter be sarved up-stairs, for ef yer left ter go down, them onruly pilgrims would make a break fer ther galoots."

Soon after Lady Kate sent up breakfast, and Lady Kate entered while Gentleman Jack and Kit were having theirs, and said:

"Mr. Overton—"

"Gentleman Jack, please, Lady Kate."

"Certainly, if you wish it; but I was going to say, Mister Gentleman Jack, that my stableman found two splendid horses hitched at the stable door this morning, and on the bridle of each was a tag bearing your name."

"Yes, I expected them, thank you."

"There are not two as fine animals in the camp, for Lou and myself had a look at them, and the Mexican saddle and bridle upon one is just perfectly splendid, but how did the horses get there?"

"Does not your stableman know, Lady Kate?"

"No, not one of them."

"Strange."

"So I think; but as you appear to be a man of mystery, I'll not attempt a solution of the coming of the horses any more than I will as to how your luggage got into these rooms," and Lady Kate smiled, but it was evident that she felt very curious about what she could not understand, while Kit also looked bewildered.

"Well, Lady Kate, some day you may understand it all; but just now it is my fancy to be a man of mystery."

"But about the two desperadoes, sir?"

"Yes."

"There is a howling mob out in front swearing to hang them."

"Yes, but they may be persuaded to change their minds."

"Are you ready, Kit?"

"Yes, pard."

"Then go down and mount your box and I'll follow with my man."

"I'll do it, and I predicts a circus."

"Poker?"

"Yas, boss."

"Ask those two gentlemen from Texas if they are ready?"

Poker obeyed, and Buckskin Sam and Colorado Carl appeared with the remark that they were ready.

"Please go down and take your places on the piazza, gentlemen, and I will follow with the prisoners."

The scouts departed, and then came the request to Poker:

"Please ask those men to come, Poker, and you follow in the rear."

"I shall go and see the result, and my prayers are with you," said Lady Kate, hastily leaving the room, and without doubt feeling great alarm as to the result.

CHAPTER XL.

THE "CRIMSON STARS" ON HAND.

The manner of the stranger was not that of a bravo, for he was cool, confident and determined.

He seemed to fully know his own powers, and to feel confident that others could be made to yield to them.

There was that in his calm face which gave Lady Kate an idea that he would triumph, for upon reaching her room she called to Gambler Lou and said quickly:

"Come, Lou, let us go to our perch and mark the result; he will win."

"He is determined to take the men out there against all odds?"

"Yes, and he feels confident."

"Not alone?"

"No, for those two Texans stand by him, and they are, I verily believe, secretly his friends."

"And Kit?"

"He is his staunch ally, and will be on hand when needed."

"The negro too you said last night is with him?"

"Yes, and goes with him when he takes those two wretches down to the coach."

"I tell you, Lou, that is a very remarkable man."

"He is indeed, Kate, and somehow I have perfect confidence in his doing just what he sets out to accomplish."

"As I have, and with this these two women, themselves mysteries, went to their point of lookout to see what would be the *finale* of the bold move of Gentleman Jack."

As the stage drove up to the front of the hotel the crowd gave a yell, and looked for Kit, the Overland driver.

They had had a guard around the hotel all night, so that the two desperadoes could not be spirited away under cover of the darkness.

They had many of them become very much under the influence of liquor, so had tried, found guilty and convicted both Irish Pat and Dutch Dave of all the crimes in the calendar.

They greatly admired the stranger with the red sombrero, but they were determined he should not stand in the way of a hanging-match now that their blood was warming up to do the work.

Many had argued that the stranger was right, for he had only taken the part of the desperadoes after having to shoot them.

But the largest number had become so wild over the affair that many slipped off to their cabins.

As the prisoners had not been taken off by night, the crowd decided that they were expecting to leave in the coach.

This caused them to gather around the coach and upon either side of the hotel door.

Kit came out smiling, a gauntlet glove upon his unhurt hand, his other in a sling.

He looked a trifle pale, but smiling and calm, and his wounded arm appeared as though, without a great deal of exertion, the hand might drop upon the revolver on his hip as quickly as the other did.

Kit nodded to those about him whom he knew, and received a welcome, while several called out:

"Whar's ther stranger and Ther Twins?"

"Pards, yer'll see 'em afore long, and it are my advice, and I gives it friendly, thet yer don't crowd thet gamecock with ther red hat when he thinks he are doing his duty."

"Yer left it fer him ter settle, and somehow he are goin' ter do it in his own way, and so I says don't kick up no row."

This plainly-spoken advice received some applause, and, stepping to the side of the coach, Kit took the reins in his one hand and mounted to the box, but called to the men at the heads of the horses to hold on, as Gentleman Jack was going to drive through for him, on account of his broken arm, and the time for starting was not quite up.

Next came out of the door Buckskin Sam and Colorado Carl.

They mounted to the top of the steps and halted there, gazing over the crowd with seeming interest.

A moment after, the door opened and out stepped the stranger.

He was dressed in his rather showy attire, and wore his scarlet sombrero jauntily.

His face was as placid as a lake untouched by a breeze, and he glanced about him pleasantly and touched his sombrero to the crowd.

"Cool as ice in January," muttered Kit, admiringly.

Then he turned to the door and out stepped the two prisoners, with Poker close upon their heels.

They were as white-faced as dead men, and gazed about them with furtive, frightened glances.

The crowd noted that their right arms were worn in a sling, and then went up a wild, threatening hurrah.

The two men hesitated and seemed about to fly back into the hotel, but Gentleman Jack said, sternly:

"Come with me!"

The crowd surged wildly about, and seemed as though preparing for a rush upon the two desperadoes to drag them to pieces.

But Gentleman Jack held up his hands, and in thunder tones shouted:

"Hold! don't crowd me, men, for I am not one to stand it."

"Back and give me room."

But the crowd surged nearer.

"Back! or by Heaven I will make room for myself and these men, who go with me out of these camps!"

He was towering now to his full height, his eyes blazing fire, they seemed so bright, and he stood upon the piazza looking down upon the maddened crowd.

But his words had checked them, and to his side stepped Buckskin Sam and Colorado Carl, while Kit stood up on his coach-seat and slowly drew his wounded arm out of the sling.

Poker, too, stepped closer to Gentleman Jack, and the crowd saw that there was a strong showing, and of men who would use their revolvers and use them well.

In the pause that followed, Gentleman Jack spoke:

"Men, these men richly deserve hanging, I admit frankly, but you left it for me to decide their fate, and after a man is wounded he is down, and no one but a contemptible coward would strike a fallen and injured man."

"They shall leave your camps, and I pledge you if they return I will be the first to say hang them up; but now let them go without more injury."

"I ask this of you."

"No!"

And the response in the negative almost drowned the voices in the affirmative, for many had yielded to the desire of Gentleman Jack.

"You refuse?"

"Yes," came in response from a number of voices.

"Very well, as you have refused, take them from me if you dare."

The words rung out like a bugle.

There was no mistaking the man now.

He was at bay, and a splendid man he looked, for his eyes burned, his snow-white teeth glittered under his long black mustache, and in each hand he held a revolver.

He had flung down the gauntlet, and defied the crowd.

They stood motionless a minute as though hardly realizing what one man dare do.

But there were ugly natures in that crowd, and their brains had been inflamed with liquor to drown reason, so that they began to get ready for a rush, when suddenly around the corner of the hotel, having arrived by the back trail, dashed four horsemen.

Two of them were men known in Hallelujah City, for they were Buffalo Bill and Wild Bill.

Of the other two, one was dressed in the fatigue uniform of a United States cavalry officer, and the other in buckskin.

These two were Surgeon Frank Powell and Texas Jack.

And all four wore in their hats the crimson star of the Texan Rancheros' League.

CHAPTER XLI.

A WORD OF ADVICE.

"THERE looms up Hallelujah, Doc," said Buffalo Bill, as he rode down into the valley with his comrades just at dawn, having broken camp a few minutes before.

His remark was addressed to Surgeon Powell, who rode by his side, while Wild Bill and Texas Jack followed close behind.

"Yes, and it looks to be unchanged since we were here before," returned the Surgeon Scout.

"I don't believe the town has grown any," Texas Jack called out.

"It may not, but I'll guarantee from what I know of the people, and my acquaintance is something limited, that the graveyard has grown considerable," Wild Bill responded in his dry way.

"It is a coincidence that we four should be

here together again, and upon the same errand as before," said Surgeon Powell.

"Yes, and I hope it will pan out as well as that trip.

"Then, Doc, you and Jack came down from the upper fort in your disguises as an Indian and an old trapper, and Wild Bill and I came from Fort B—not knowing you were to come, or that we could get your valuable aid.

"You fooled us well, for we could not get at your racket, and knowing us you had the laugh on us.

"Now we are on the same trail and together, and we will wake Hallelujah up if the roughs here jump upon us as they did before."

"Yes, Buffalo Bill, but we won't have that wonderful fellow, Bandbox Bill, to chip in and help us out at the right time," Surgeon Powell said.

"He may be here, for there is no telling where we may find him.

"I only hope we will run across him in the Hallelujah this side the grave," said Texas Jack.

"How strange that he should wish to help us, yet remain unknown to us."

"That is his strange way of acting, and the crimson stars we wear will make us known to him."

"I am hungry for one of Lady Kate's good breakfasts, so let us hurry on," said Wild Bill.

At a more rapid pace they pressed on, for the remark of Wild Bill had struck a chord in the heart of each, or rather the stomach, for the good breakfasts of Lady Kate were well remembered.

They had reached a pine thicket not far from the hotel, when suddenly a man appeared before them.

He was a miner, and had his pick on his shoulder as though going to work.

"Pard, hain't you Buffalo Bill?" he asked excitedly.

"Yes."

"I thought I know'd yer, for I was in Hallelujah when you was here last.

"And that are Wild Bill Hikok?"

"It is."

"Yas, I remembers yer, and you are jist ther men as is wanted in Hallelujah this blessed minute."

"What's up, pard?"

"Ther deuce ter pay, and things gittin' hotter."

"Pray tell me what it is?"

"Does you know the man with the red sombrero?"

"We haven't the honor."

"He calls himself Gentleman Jack."

"Ah, a gentleman in Hallelujah?"

"Well, he be, from top-knot ter toe-nail.

"He comed in yesterday a-drivin' Keen Kit's old huss, fer Kit were wounded.

"Kit interduced him as Gentleman Jack, and he are dressed as fine as a dandy, with red sombrero and all to make him look A Number One.

"Then Kit told how he had saved ther treasure-box from road-agents, for ther Toll-Takers is at ther old tricks ag'in, and had left some of 'em dead on ther trail."

"Is this a long story, pard, for we are getting hungry?" growled Wild Bill.

"It are a story ter interest yer, if, as I believes, yer loves right and hates wrong."

"Go on, my friend, for I am sure you have something to tell us," Surgeon Powell said.

"I has," and the miner told of the scene in the saloon of the Queen of Hearts the night before, and how Gentleman Jack had taken the desperadoes into the hotel to protect them, and what followed, adding:

"I stood the racket ontill arter midnight, and then ther place grew too hot fer me and I leanted.

"But as I come by Kate's Kitchen jist now, thar were a hundred o' ther boys thar, most of 'em wild drunk, and layin' fer ther desperadoes ter be brought out by Gentleman Jack and tuk off in Kit's coach.

"I hain't pinin' ter go ter heaven jist now, so I concluded ter go on ter my claim, but seein' you, and recognizin' yer, Buffalo Bill and Wild Bill, and seein' a army officer with yer, I concluded I'd let yer know about ther rumpus about ter begin up at Kate's Kitchen.

"Yer kin take that trail thar to ther left, ther one I come down, and it will bring yer up in ther rear of ther hotel, and as I guesses thar is ter be a cirkis, I'll jist come, too."

"All right, my friend, we will get there at once," said Surgeon Powell, and then he added:

"Who is that man you call Gentleman Jack?"

"Ther Lord only knows, sir, for he come from nowhar, but he are a mansich as Bandbox Bill, ther Bravo in Broadcloth, were when he were here, and you remembers him."

"Yes, and you said there were two scouts there?"

"There are."

"Do you know their names?"

"I heerd them called Buckskin Sam and Colorado Carl o' Texas, and they is dandies, too, while ther nigger hain't 'way back down ther lane."

"And they are all Gentleman Jack's friends?"

"They be."

"Then I guess we are, too."

"Come, boys," and Surgeon Powell led the way.

Following the trail the man had directed them to take, they came up in the rear of Kate's Kitchen, right around the stables.

They heard the noisy crowd, and seating themselves well in their saddles, and looking to their arms, they rode around toward the front of the hotel, for something told them that their presence was needed there sadly.

Another moment and they appeared upon the scene, and the situation was before them in all its danger.

CHAPTER XLII.

UNLOOKED-FOR AID.

It was at a most critical moment when the Crimson Star League arrived upon the scene.

Gentleman Jack stood fairly at bay before the two terribly frightened desperadoes, and upon either side of the piazza steps were Buckskin Sam and Colorado Carl, while Poker was in the rear of the two men who were the cause of the disturbance.

Upon his box stood Kit, a revolver in each hand now, for his good right arm had been taken from the sling it had been in.

It was a picture to behold and never forget—a tableau to end in a dire tragedy.

The crowd were as ugly as men get to be under the influence of bad liquor exciting evil natures.

They had drawn their weapons, too, and were pressing forward to seize the prisoners, but had halted as for a breathing spell, when they caught sight of Gentleman Jack at bay.

They had largely the odds, and they must not yield to the will of one man, a stranger, backed by four others.

The desperadoes must be taken and hanged then and there.

It was at this moment, just as they paused for the rush, and when a minute more would usher in the rattle of revolvers, that Surgeon Powell and Buffalo Bill dashed around the corner of the hotel, with Texas Jack and Wild Bill close in their rear.

Many knew them, and there was something in the determined manner in which the four forced their horses in front of the crowd that showed that they understood the situation.

The crowd had dropped back a few paces, but sullenly, and Surgeon Powell, as an army officer, said sternly:

"Well, what means this scene?"

Gentleman Jack had not changed color at their coming, and said in tones that were not at all excited:

"It means, 'sir, that I wounded two desperadoes who deserve hanging, but having wounded them, I will not yield them up to be hanged, so intend taking them out of the camps, to which these gentlemen have raised an objection; that is all."

"Well, sir, as an army officer I will see that no lawless hanging is done here, and you can take your men where you please."

They were bold words, but they fell upon the crowd harshly, for one called out:

"They is only four more, pards—nine in all ag'in' us."

"Yas, but ther wu'st nine-pins you ever undertook, yer infernal varmin'ts, ter knock down in one game o' ball," shouted Kit.

The situation for Gentleman Jack had been materially strengthened by the coming of the Crimson Star League; but it was yet appallingly strained, and Surgeon Powell again spoke:

"Men, I am Surgeon Powell, of the army; this is Buffalo Bill, chief of scouts; and my other companions are Wild Bill and Texas Jack."

"If you have heard of us, you may know that we are on the side of law and order, and in my authority as an officer, I command you to at once disperse, for we stand by this gentleman and his intention to protect these men."

Many of the crowd replaced their revolvers at this.

They were not willing to resist an army officer, and there was a slight wavering.

At this moment Panther Foot and Night Eyes, two well-known Sioux miners, who had allied themselves to the Hallelujah camps, slipped up the steps of the piazza and placed themselves on either side of Gentleman Jack.

The latter showed no sign at their coming, but the crowd saw that the man in the red sombrero was arraying a terrible force against them, for the pluck and deadly aim of the redskins was well known.

"Hooray! we is eleven all told, and we is here fer bizziness," cried Kit, who now seemed really anxious for a row to be precipitated.

"They is, with them two jail-birds, only thirteen all told, pards, and thirteen are a lucky number and we kin wipe 'em out," cried a voice in the crowd.

Still they made no movement for a rush, but that it would come there seemed to be no doubt of, and Surgeon Powell again called out:

"Men, I once more command you to disperse."

"We hain't a-goin' ter do it, cap'n," cried a voice.

But just then the hotel door swung open behind the prisoners and out stepped Gambler Lou and Lady Kate.

They had their belt of arms strapped on, and they were followed by two of the Chinese servants of the hotel dragging something after them.

This the two women grasped and aiming it at the crowd suddenly opened a fire that scattered the armed mob in all directions.

CHAPTER XLIII.

A MYSTERY TO ALL.

WHAT Gambler Lou and Lady Kate turned upon the wild mob of over a hundred men was not a cannon, brought from the old fort in the rear of the hotel, nor was it a repeating-rifle.

It was no more nor less than a hose.

The water to supply the hotel came down from a large spring tumbling over the mountains, and was conducted into a large basin in the rocks, which served as a tank.

Lady Kate had had a large hose attached to a piece of piping run into the rocks, and through which flowed a four-inch stream of water which came with terrific force when turned on.

The nozzle end of the hose was kept in the hotel kitchen, in case of fire, and seeing how determined the crowd was to fight for the prisoners, the happy thought had seized upon her to lend what aid she could, so she cried out:

"Come, Lou, we can help them!"

Gambler Lou followed unhesitatingly, though wondering what Lady Kate intended to do.

Down the back stairs to the kitchen they ran, and seizing upon two of the Chinese servants, Lady Kate cried:

"Quick! turn on the water and drag this end of the hose into the office!"

The Chinese obeyed with alacrity, for they were alarmed at the terrible situation, and realizing what was to be done, Chuck-a-Luck said:

"Ladee Katee goin' to heapee washee-washee miner man."

"Gettee wet, catchee heapee cold, killee miner man allee same."

In spite of the gravity of the situation, both Gambler Lou and Lady Kate laughed at Chuck-a-Luck's idea that getting washed would kill the miners.

The nozzle was a large one, for it was home-made of iron piping, and as the Chinese drew the heavy hose out upon the piazza, Lady Kate and Gambler Lou seized it and turned it upon the crowd, just as the water came through with a force that would have knocked a horse down if it hit him fairly.

Down went the whole front rank, pistols were knocked out of hands, and clothes were almost torn off when the terrible stream of water struck a man.

Tumbling over each other, the men fell and the relentless stream rushed upon them, now flying upward and drenching the furthest ends of the crowd, and now downward upon those nearest.

Kit howled with delight, the scouts yelled, and the Chinese danced a jig, in which Poker joined them.

Even the frightened prisoners laughed, while Buffalo Bill and his party nearly fell from their horses in convulsions of laughter.

The crowd soon began to see the ridiculous side of the whole affair, and yelled and cheered with delight.

In the midst of the excitement Gentleman Jack said, sternly:

"Come with me! quick! Get into the coach!"

The prisoners obeyed quickly, and, leaping upon the box by the side of the convulsed Kit, Gentleman Jack seized the reins from their turn upon the lamp, and away sped the coach.

The water still caused the miners to hunt cover, so that the coach was out of sight before the escape of the prisoners was noticed by others than those who did not come in for the aim of Lady Kate's novel water-gun.

But the act had caused laughter to follow curses, and the ducking, if it had not done what Chuck-a-Luck had predicted—kill the miners—had promptly sobered those who were in range, and good humor prevailed.

It seemed a perfect circus for them all, and then one poor fellow, looking like a drowned rat and holding his clothes around him as best he could, came up and said:

"Lady Kate, I'd hold up my hands, ef I dared ter, and say don't shoot; but I hain't ther confidence now I had of my clothes stayin' on, so I jist says you is ther most dangerous daisy I ever seen in a fight."

"Lordy! I are brim full o' water, Lady Kate."

"It's ther fu'st washin' I hev hed since I were a baby."

"Lady Kate, I hev been drowned, and only a leetle whisky will revive me."

This last speaker struck the key-note, and Gambler Lou promptly said:

"Gentlemen, it is my treat, so walk into the

saloon of the Queen of Hearts and have a drink all round—then I close the place for the day."

A yell greeted these words, and the saloon, which Gambler Lou had not allowed to be opened, was now thrown open, and her health was drunk with cheers.

There was not a sign of ill-feeling against the two women for turning upon them the irresistible fire of water, and all was good humor as the drenched crowd hastened to their cabins to make what changes of clothing their limited wardrobes would permit.

There was a little method too in the aim of Lady Kate, for she had not allowed a single one of the toughs, whom she saw in the crowd, to escape, for the former backers of The Twins had been loud in their denunciation of them, to keep the tide from overwhelming them, and the possibility of a more numerous hanging.

The four scouts had dismounted meanwhile, taken their horses to the stable, and entered the hotel, where Lady Kate and Gambler Lou welcomed them, and Buckskin Sam stepped up and said, addressing Cody:

"You are Buffalo Bill, I believe?"

"Yes, sir."

"I am glad to meet one of whom I have heard so much."

"I am Sam Hall of the Texas Rangers, and am known better as Buckskin Sam!"

"Buckskin Sam! indeed I am glad to know you, for often have I heard of you."

"Let me present you to my friends."

"With pleasure, when I have introduced my pard, Colorado Carl."

"And you too I am glad to know, Colorado Carl," said Buffalo Bill, and he at once presented the Rangers to Surgeon Powell and Wild Bill, while Texas Jack, who just then came in from the stable, claimed Buckskin Sam as an old-time pard, and added:

"We used to call him Little Yankee too, but I believe he likes the name of Buckskin Sam best."

"But who was that magnificent pard of yours, Sam, wearing the red sombrero and dressed like a dandy?"

"You will have to ask some one who knows him, Jack, for Colorado Carl and myself met him last night and just took to him because we saw he was a man clean through."

"He drove off like a man who knows how to handle the ribbons," Buffalo Bill said, and he was good authority, having driven a stage in the Rocky Mountains himself.

"Yes, he took Kit's drive for him, as he was wounded; but he'll be back day after to-morrow, and we hope to see more of him, for he has turned Hallelujah City upside down," Lady Kate remarked, and until the four scouts went in to breakfast, the praises of Gentleman Jack were sung; but to all, his antecedents seemed to remain a perfect mystery.

CHAPTER XLIV.

THE RETURN OF GENTLEMAN JACK.

WHEN Gentleman Jack saw the pressing situation brought about by the overwhelming aid loaned by Lady Kate and Gambler Lou, he took advantage of it at once.

He was not flying from the responsibility, but he seemed to read aright that the water onslaught would put the whole crowd in a good humor, and as the bones of contention, the two prisoners, were removed, no trouble would follow.

So he hastened them into the coach, seized the reins and was away before a move could have been made to prevent his going.

As for Kit he was of no use, for he could hardly hold himself on the box from laughter, and his merriment was catching, as Gentleman Jack joined in, and an echo came from within the coach, for the now delighted desperadoes would have laughed with delight even had there been nothing ludicrous in what had happened.

At last Kit controlled his risibilities sufficiently to say:

"Pard, ef I are dyin' and thinks o' that same scramble we seen, I are going to laugh."

"It were the funniest deal I ever seen."

"Yer see you hed worked them galoots up so they meant ter fight, and I hed got primed and willin', and cold meat would hev laid 'round thar pretty conspicuous by this time I'm a-thinkin'."

"They showed how infernally in 'arnest they was when Buf'ler Bill and his pards come, and they took no heed ter what ther Surgeon Scout told 'em."

"Then up comes them two Injuns and sided with yer, and ther boys all knows 'em, fer they was Bandbox Bill's pards, ef they is Injuns, and they don't skeer at nothin'."

"They hes a claim up ther valley and works it regular, and they don't harm nobody unless they is jumped on, and then they is wuss nor a buzz-saw."

"Now when they come up and sided with yer I war sartain ther crowd would back; but they was too ugly, and things looked awful blue, I kin tell yer."

"Then ther door opens and I see'd that petticoat quartette, Lady Kate, Gambler Lou and

ther heathen a-draggin', as I thought, a anaconda arter them."

"Then Lady Kate tarns on ther spicket, and ther stream o' water thet come out o' ther nozzle did look ter me like smoke from a commat."

"What a racket it made, too, and when it struck that crowd, oh, Lord—"

And Kit went off into another burst of laughter.

"And it were loaded to ther muzzle, fer ther thing kept a-shootin', and it were aimed ter knock a man down, strip him, wash him, set him up ag'in, and start him down ther valley on a run."

"My! but it would hev broke ther spokes off my wheels and cleaned ther paint off ther old huss ef it hed touched it."

"Excuse me, pard, but I hes ter laugh or bu'st."

At last Kit sobered down and asked:

"Now, does yer intend ter let them galoots go?"

"Certainly."

"They'll git hanged some day."

"I do not doubt that; but when we get well out of this line of camps, on toward the up-country mines, I will let them go."

"Waal, you hes saved 'em from hanging."

"Postponed their day of execution, rather, Kit," was the answer.

"What does yer think of the comin' of ther Surgeon Scout, Buffalo Bill and t'others?"

"They certainly came boldly to my aid."

"Yes, they is jist ther men to do thet, for thar hain't no slouch about them."

"But, does yer conclude yerself to live in Hallelujah?"

"Yes; I shall make it my headquarters for some time."

"You has more narve than any man I ever see afore, pard."

"Well, it is comfortable to feel that you have nerve in this country; but I wonder if we are going to be held up this time by the Toll-Takers?"

"I hopes not, for they'd be very severe on you, pard."

"Doubtless, if they caught me; but how is your arm, Kit?"

"A leetle sore, but thet are all."

"Do you think, when we get to the spot where the road-agents attacked us, you could drive on with one hand?"

"You don't mean ter leave me?"

"You return day after to-morrow?"

"Yes, pard."

"You can pick me up then, and I'll return to Hallelujah City with you."

"Pard, don't be too venturesome."

"Oh, I only wish to look over their trails a little, and will be waiting for your return."

"And ther pilgrims inside?"

"Drop them near the end of your run."

"All right, pard."

No sign of the Toll-Takers was discovered, and the coach reached the scene of the late attack without adventure.

Here Gentleman Jack drew rein with the remark:

"You are sure you can drive on alone, Kit?"

"Pard, ther critters will go ther trail without me ef I let 'em, so don't fear, fer I hain't useless by long odds."

"I only do not wish you to injure your arm by using it more than can be helped, Kit."

"Now I will leave you."

He sprang from the box as he spoke and opened the coach door.

The Twins looked a trifle alarmed.

"Men, I have decided to let Kit drive on from here, as it will not injure his arm I think, and so I will have a word with you before going."

"Yes, pard, and we thanks yer fer savin' us, we does," said Irish Pat.

"Yes, pard, yer is the gamest one I ever seen, and we owes it to you our necks is not stretched," Dutch Dave added.

"Well, you deserved hanging, as I said; but I hope this will be a lesson to you and that you will change your evil lives, though I have no idea that you will."

"Indeed we will, pard, for we has decided, me and Dave, to j'ine ther church and live different."

"It were too close a call we hed ter fergit it soon."

"Well, keep quiet on the back seat here, for your wounds are severe, if not dangerous, and when Kit reaches the up-country he will tell you to go."

"I hope you'll get through without meeting the Toll-Takers, as you said you had all your money with you, and it would be a pity to be robbed, and more, Kit has a pretty good sum along I would hate to see him lose."

"Good-by, and I hope you will change your lives as you say you will."

"You can depend on us, pard, ter do it."

With a wave of the hand to Kit Gentleman Jack stepped back and the coach rolled on up the mountain-trail.

Ten minutes after as it wound around a bend on the down trail a man slipped out of a thicket, leaped lightly upon the baggage-rack behind, and was unseen by both Kit and the two desperadoes inside.

CHAPTER XLV.

THE PENITENTS.

"SAY, Dutch, what does yer think o' all this?" asked Irish Pat of Dutch Dave, when the coach rolled on its way once more, after leaving Gentleman Jack back on the trail.

"Of all what, Pat?"

"Waal, luck at us."

"I sees us."

"We were king bees only yesterday in Hallelujah."

"Yas."

"We had it all our own way, and when we spoke the camps held up th'r hands."

"Yas, thet are so."

"We had a lot o' galoots we c'u'd allus depend on ter back us up."

"Yas."

"Waal, ter-day we is down deep."

"We?"

"We started in fer a leetle fun with ther nigger, and durn me ef I seen ther fun."

"Ef yer c'u'd see yer face whar he hit yer, yer wouldn't laugh."

"Yas, he sent us a-whoopin' with heads down heels up."

"Thet Red Hat were ther cause."

"I knows thet; but when he grabbed me I thought I hed been run inter by a grizzly."

"Oh, my! but he jist sent me a-flyin'."

"Waal, didn't he hev me covered all over with his revolvers, so I c'u'dn't move, and I thought my time had come."

"Yas, and then he made us take a walk for our health."

"We was tuk sudden, and I were sart'in we c'u'd even up matters at night, and then git ther nigger's dust in a game, and ther old man's, too."

"Yas, but ther old man wasn't sich a fool as he looked."

"Nary, and it were good o' him ter wound us and not ter kill us."

"Yas, he acted the gentleman, Pat, clean through."

"And kept ther gang from hangin' us."

"He did."

"Waal, thet are past, and we is out o' ther rackit, and I hain't sorry."

"Nor me."

"Them scouts with Buf'ler Bill hain't come ter Hallelujah City fer nuthin'."

"I'm a-reckonin' not."

"They is come thar with thet army capt'in ter reform ther community."

"Yas, it would be gittin' too good fer us."

"Sure."

"They'd be hevin' a jedge and a parson next."

"Sart'in."

"I is glad we is gone."

"Me too."

"But it were a close call."

"You bet."

"Now how much dust hev yer got about yer garments?"

After the two had counted over their wealth, each aiding the other, as there were but two good hands between them, Irish Pat said:

"I has eleven hundred."

"And me, too, with forty-six over."

"Dutchy."

"Yas, Irish."

"We is out ter stick tergether!"

"We be."

"This are a dreadful lonesome road."

"Yas."

"It are six miles to ther station."

"It be about that."

"Did yer hear what ther gent said!"

"Ter what does yer refer?"

"He said as how he hoped we'd reach no road-agents."

"I heerd him."

"Ter rob us."

"Yas."

"And he'd be sorry, fer it were all we had."

"Yas."

"And they'd get a good sum from Kit."

"Thet's what he said."

"Then Kit's carryin' boodle through."

"Sart'in."

"How much?"

"Don't know."

"I guesses it's quite a sum."

"Yas, guess so."

"It would associate uncommon well with what we has."

"So it would."

"Yer know ther steep hill ahead about a mile?"

"Yas, I recommembers it."

"Waal, ef ther train are a-climbin' thet hill, and anything w'u'd happen to ther driver, then I thinks it would do no damage to ther old coach."

"I onderstands yer, pard."

"Then my game are ter jist both of us lean out o' ther coach at ther hill, level on Kit's back and pull trigger."

"When he drops we kin slip out, stop ther team, git his leetle pile, and, takin' ther two best of ther critturs, jist levant all alone."

"Yas, I sees how it can be did."

"They won't send out ter look the coach up until it don't arrive ter-night at ther end o' Kit's

run, and they can't trail by night, so we'll git some twenty hours' start.

"We kin shove ther critters fer all they is wuth, and when they is played out we kin go afoot."

"Thet's so."

"And be as safe as we wants ter."

"Sartin."

"Then I says do ther work."

"Me, too."

"Waal, jist wait ontill we reaches ther hill, and then we'll let Kit hev it tergether right squar' whar he lives."

"You aim fer his back and I'll take his head, so thar will be no mistake, for he's a catamount ter kill, and ef we don't fix him right off, we'll git hurted, sartin."

"Thet's so, pard; but I'm with yer."

And so the two repentant reprobates plotted to kill and rob the man who had aided in saving their necks from the noose.

After a few minutes of silence the Irishman again opened the conversation, his wicked brain having been busy the while with more plotting.

"Dutchy."

"Yas, Irish."

"I've got a big idee."

"What be it?"

"We kin git shelter up among ther Toll-Takers."

"So we kin."

"We kin take all six o' ther horses, fork over a few bundred with 'em to ther chief, and say we tuk ther outfit and come to join him."

"So we kin, Irish."

"Let's do it."

"Yas, I'm with yer."

"Waal, here are ther hill, so git yer gun ready."

Dutch Dave obeyed, and each man, revolver in hand, glanced out of the coach window nearest to him, upon their intended victim.

CHAPTER XLVI. WITHOUT MERCY.

"Don't it look easy, Dutchy?"

"Yas."

"Waal, when I says fire, jist pull trigger."

"I'll do it."

"Don't make no mistake."

"I'll git thar."

All unconscious of danger the driver of the Overland went on his way.

He wondered at the stopping off of Gentleman Jack not a little, and he could form no conclusion regarding his having done so.

It was near the spot where he had picked him up when on the way to Hallelujah, and it seemed strange that he should stop off there again.

That he had taken Gentleman Jack to Hallelujah City baggageless, and soon after found his room full of luggage, Kit could not account for.

Then the mysterious rearing of horses there for the stranger, not to speak of the appearance of Buckskin Sam and Colorado Carl in the camps, along with the negro, Poker, all following so close upon the coming of Gentleman Jack, was more than Kit could fathom.

"Thar's suthin' up I can't adzactly git on to," he muttered.

When he reached the long, steep hill, running up a canyon, with high rock walls on either side, Kit muttered:

"This are ther very place fer a ambush, and yet I hev never struck one here."

He found no difficulty in driving, or but little, with his one hand, and felt that it would not be long before he could use the wounded arm as before.

He had gotten about half-way up the hill and halted at a break where the wheels could stand in a rut to give the horses a rest, when suddenly two sharp reports rung out.

Kit started, sprung to his feet and dropped his hand instinctively upon his revolver, while the team, accustomed to firing, stood still.

Then out of the coach sprung the two desperadoes, confident that their work had been done well.

But a form from the rack on the rear leaped nimbly upon the top of the stage and standing there covered each man with a revolver, while he said sternly:

"Drop those weapons both of you!"

"Lordy! Gentleman Jack, be it you?" cried Kit, half-dazed by the shots so near his head, and the situation.

"Yes, Kit, I have been taking a ride on the rack and rather enjoyed what I overheard."

"Irish Pat, walk around the coach and take your place by Dutch Dave."

The man obeyed, almost wild now with fear. As for Dutch Dave he had dropped his revolver at the command of Gentleman Jack and stood in silence.

Then the stranger said:

"Keep them covered, Kit, while I dismount."

He leaped lightly to the ground, drew from his pocket a steel manacle and in an instant had slipped it upon the left wrists of the two desperadoes.

"Now get into that coach."

With his aid they did so.

"Take the back seat!"

They obeyed. Gentleman Jack then searched them, and closing the door picked up their weapons and sprung upon the box with Keen Kit.

"Pard, what were up?"

"Do you not know that they tried to kill you?"

"Lordy, I thought you fired the shots and they jumped out and ran from the big skeer thet was arter 'em."

Gentleman Jack laughed.

Then he said:

"I mistrusted them, so pretended to remain back upon the trail to await your return; but I cut off the bend, came out of the thicket as you came along and sprung up behind."

"I am well prepared, as you see, so with this gimlet bored a couple of holes in the back of the coach and kept my ear there."

"What I heard proved that those men need hanging."

"But I had extracted the bullets from their revolvers when I had them last night, so knew you were in no danger."

"They did their work to get the money which they believed you had and which I spoke of as a bait to catch them."

"Waal, they is varmint's o' ther wu'st kind," said Kit, after Gentleman Jack had told the whole story of the plot.

"Yes, and I shall now take them back to Hallelujah City with us in the coach."

"They'll hang 'em."

"Of course; that is why I will now surrender them to the miners, on condition that they try them for their crimes."

"I shall not raise hand to protect them now."

"Pard, ag'in I owes you my life."

"Don't mention it, Kit, for you are a good fellow, and deserve all I can do for you."

And so the coach rolled on to the end of Kit's run, Gentleman Jack driving.

And then back on the trail to Hallelujah City it started with its prisoners and a few passengers inside.

It was just half an hour before sunset when Gentleman Jack dashed up to the door of Kate's Kitchen in fine style and beheld Buffalo Bill and his party seated upon the piazza.

Buckskin Sam and Colorado Carl were also there, and as the passengers sprung out Gentleman Jack, still keeping his position on the coach arose and said to the large crowd:

"My friends, I protected two of the worst villains from the rope that ever disgraced the form of manhood."

"On the way out they plotted, believing I had been left on the trail, to kill Keen Kit, rob him, and taking his horses, go to join the Toll-Takers."

"I have brought them back to you, and if you will promise to try them squarely, I surrender them to you."

"We promise!" came in a roar from the crowd.

"Then here are your prisoners."

And, leaping to the ground, Gentleman Jack threw open the stage-door and revealed the cowering desperadoes shrinking way back from observation upon the back seat.

A wild yell broke from the crowd, and the prisoners were taken out, while a leader of the miners said:

"We'll want you for a witness, Gentleman Jack, and you, too, Kit."

"I will be wholly at your service, sir," said Gentleman Jack.

"Me, too," responded Kit.

"And so will those two wretches," muttered Surgeon Powell, to Buffalo Bill.

CHAPTER XLVII.

A MINING-CAMP COURT.

THE return of Gentleman Jack with the two prisoners, whom he had, two days before, saved from the fury of a Hallelujah mob, was a cause of great excitement in the mining-camps.

The miners struck work at once, and they crowded up to Kate's Kitchen to hear all the news.

Having made his little speech, giving his reasons for bringing the two criminals back, Gentleman Jack walked up to where Buffalo Bill, Surgeon Powell and the others sat, and said in his polite way:

"Gentlemen, I have to thank you for timely aid the other morning, for but for your coming we would have reached a climax very suddenly, and I am most grateful."

"We will meet again, I hope."

He had seemed to speak to all, for his eyes had met those of each one of the six who were seated upon that end of the piazza, the three scouts from Fort Grand, Surgeon Powell and the two Texans, Buckskin Sam and Colorado Carl.

Raising his crimson sombrero with an air of courtly grace, he strode on into the hotel.

There Lady Kate and Gambler Lou greeted him with a warm welcome and a burst of laughter, which showed how they appreciated what they had done.

"You two could run a regiment with that

water battery," he said, with a laugh, and after thanking them went on to his room.

But Kit remained behind to sing his praises and tell the whole story of the exploit on the Overland and catching of the two desperadoes.

Gentleman Jack came late down to supper, after the distinguished strangers at his table had finished their meal.

Then he walked to the Queen of Hearts Saloon, where the trial of the two prisoners was going on, for all the others had gone there, and he had been sent for as a witness.

A yell of delight greeted him as he entered, and he was given a seat near Gambler Lou and Lady Kate, those who were to conduct the trial being at that end of the improvised courtroom.

Here, too, by a very clever arrangement of Gambler Lou, were Surgeon Powell, Buffalo Bill and his scouts, Buckskin Sam, Colorado Carl, the two Indians, Panther Foot and Night-Eyes, with Poker in the rear.

Lady Kate's regret was that she was not able to fetch the hose into the saloon to keep order.

The jury had been selected, also the judge, and Kit had just given his testimony when Gentleman Jack entered, and it may be assumed that they had made the gentleman wearing the Red Sombrero more of a hero than ever.

Gentleman Jack, when called upon, gave his testimony in a few terse words, and the two prisoners, as pallid as a corpse, listened with heads bowed.

They knew that there was no hope for them then.

Then the "judge," an intelligent and honest-faced miner, made his charge, and the case was given to the jury.

It did not take that frontier jury long to arrive at a verdict, and the foreman soon pronounced the two men:

"Guilty, and well deserving of hanging."

The shout that went up at this showed that the finding was popular with all, and the judge then pronounced the sentence, which was that the two men should be:

"Given a stiff drink of rum, allowed ten minutes for prayer, and then to be taken out and hanged at the big tree that does duty as a gallows in Hallelujah City."

Then he turned to thank Gentleman Jack for his valuable services to the community, adding that the citizens had that day formed a court and a Vigilance Committee, and Hallelujah City was to be purified thoroughly, as he, Gentleman Jack, having shown them all how cowardly they had been to allow desperadoes to rule, they would now turn over a new leaf, and border justice should be dealt out most liberally to evil-doers.

Gentleman Jack bowed, and then said:

"While you are in the good work, judge, allow me to name several of your citizens who are fit subjects for the hangman's noose."

"I have here the name of Devil Dick, who is a secret spy in these camps of the Toll-Takers."

"It's a lie!" yelled a man in the crowd springing to his feet, revolver in hand.

"If a search of him does not prove my words, I'll give him any satisfaction he may desire," coolly said Gentleman Jack.

"Seize him and search him," roared the judge.

It was done, and in papers found upon him was conclusive proof of the charge against him, for one letter, sealed, and ready to dispatch to a station on the Overland, addressed to "Captain Cutter," told of a treasure-box to be sent through by Keen Kit's coach on a certain date.

"This settles him—I leave him in your hands, gentlemen of the jury," cried the judge.

"Guilty!" shouted the jury as though they had been practicing the word in chorus.

"He also shall die by hanging with these other two, after a drink of whisky is given him and ten minutes for prayer," said the considerate judge.

Then he turned to again thank Gentleman Jack, but he had quickly slipped out of a window near and disappeared, after handing the judge a slip of paper upon which were a dozen names, according to the nomenclature of the camps.

"I have here," read the judge, "a list of names, and they will be recognized as I read them out:

"Cherry Bob, Duckleg Dick, Long Luke, Buck Hazel, Angel Pete, Lazy Rube, Rats, Benzine Bob, Card-Sharp Carl, Cool Kennedy, Injun Sam, Mexican John and Cat-Eye Kit."

"These men are a bad lot, and have held a high hand here in Hallelujah."

"They are every one in this hall to-night, and I order them under arrest, to be taken to the hanging of the three men now under sentence, and then to be turned loose to make tracks out of these camps by sunrise in the morning."

"If any one of them is found in Hallelujah after sun-up, then he is to be hanged without mercy."

"Gents, I thinks that finishes our business for to-night, and makes a pretty clean sweep in Hallelujah of the worst ones, which will help those who are a little inclined to run the camps, to pause and consider."

"Now let me say in conclusion, if the twelve

men named don't quietly submit to being marched out to see the execution of the men who are to hang, they will simply put their necks in danger too.

"So hands off revolvers, men, unless you wish to end your days by a rope about your necks."

That settled it with the picked dozen, and they submitted in dire fear of their lives."

CHAPTER XLVIII.

A MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE.

If there were any dissenters in Hallelujah City to the opinion of the "Judge," as to the course he took with the dozen strangely-named individuals who were sentenced to decamp from the town for the town's good, not any one dared rise and say so just then.

One individual did rise and ask:

"If it might please ther court, and he hoped it would, who had given in ther black list ag'in' ther twelve gents who was ter git out o' town?"

"Gentleman Jack handed me the slip, and advises, if we want peace in Hallelujah, to make them *levant*, as he knows them to be bad medicine clean through.

"Do you object?"

No, the inquisitive man had no objection to offer, he only wanted to know if there was good reason for causing the dozen to make tracks.

"Then you consider there is reason?"

"I does, jedge, may it please the court," was the answer, and the man subsided, feeling that perhaps he had made a mistake from being so inquisitive.

The three doomed men were then marched up to the bar and "treated" by the "court," while the dozen were formed in line close behind them, but did not share in the beverage.

The Twins and Devil Dick gulped down a glass of liquor nervously and then were started for the gallows tree.

The "judge" carried the three lariats, the jury of twelve marched behind the dozen culprits who were to depart before sunset and the crowd followed.

"There is no use trying to stem this tide, Doc," said Buffalo Bill curiously.

"No, for it is border justice, and that jury are not half as wrong as half the juries who try cases in a real court—there is no hanging here by circumstantial evidence, and really speaking these dozen villains should join the three who are to be hanged."

"That man, Gentleman Jack, has done good work for Hallelujah City this night."

"If the trial was only regular, Frank."

"It's justice, regular or irregular."

"Still, if I believed there was a chance to stem the current and take the men to the fort for trial I would like to do it; but even Gentleman Jack could not now quell the cyclone he has set going."

"Nor Lady Kate with her water-battery," laughed Buffalo Bill.

"No, they would not stand that now, but rush upon her and, I fear, turn the tables upon her. Those men have got to hang."

"Shall we go and see it?"

"No; for I do not care to look upon any misery duty does not compel me to witness."

"I am tired, so shall go to bed, and in the morning we must have a talk with that curious man of the Red Sombrero."

"Yes."

And Buffalo Bill followed the Surgeon Scout, while the rest of the party did the same, Kit alone going to the hanging.

That it was done without a hitch the reader can well understand, and then, after celebrating the event and starting the "Dozen" on their way, the miners dispersed to their various cabins and Hallelujah was in deeper repose than it had been at night for many a long month.

At sunrise not one of the exiled men could be found in the camps, for they knew better, after all they had witnessed, to linger a minutelounger than was necessary in a region so unhealthy to evil-doers as Hallelujah City had suddenly become.

Never before in its history had Kate's Kitchen appeared so serene, and no one was up to see the coach roll out of the town on its way Eastward, for Kit had different hours for leaving on his days from the camps to connect with a branch trail coach once a week, and which gave him the chance to always lay over on Sundays at Hallelujah City.

When Lady Kate arose, she was told by Scotty that he had found an envelope on his desk containing more than the amount of his bill and a card upon which was written:

"To liquidate my account.

"My farewell to Lady Kate and Gambler Lou."

"GENTLEMAN JACK."

Lady Kate was worried, for she had no idea that her mysterious guest meant to take his departure.

She at once sought Gambler Lou, and she was also mystified.

The rooms of the stranger were vacant, and nothing of his luggage remained behind.

Not a servant had helped him down with his things, or any one seen him go.

Of course he had gone with Kit, yet no one could be found who had seen the coach depart before dawn.

Then the two splendid horses of the stranger had disappeared as mysteriously as had their master.

The stableman had gone to bed, and knew nothing of their being taken out.

When Buffalo Bill and Surgeon Powell came down, Lady Kate asked them if they had heard the stranger take his departure during the night?

They were both light sleepers, but had heard nothing.

And more, they were greatly surprised at the going of Gentleman Jack, and regretted it, too, for they had wished to have a long talk with him.

"Could we not overtake him?" asked Buffalo Bill.

"How long has he been gone?" Surgeon Powell inquired.

"If he went with Kit, he left at four o'clock; it is now after eight."

"Too long a start, so we will wait for Kit's return."

In the mean time the scouts tried to trail the horses of Gentleman Jack from the stable.

They tracked them around to the Overland trail, and there lost them wholly.

Two days after, Kit came in on his run, and was eagerly asked about Gentleman Jack.

"Hain't he here?" he inquired, with surprise that was not feigned.

"No."

"Then them infernal Dozen hev done him," he said, savagely, and this served to cast light upon the mysterious disappearance of Gentleman Jack.

CHAPTER XLIX.

LIKE A FORLORN HOPE.

THE hint thrown out by Kit, as to a reason for the disappearance of Gentleman Jack, had about the same effect as fire upon powder.

It caused an explosion.

Then Scotty told how four of the Dozen had begged him to give them a room at the hotel, as they wasn't well, and wanted to rest before going on their tramp, and that their comrades would get the traps from their cabins and come by for them before dawn.

He had given the four men the only room vacant in the hotel that night—the same that the two desperadoes had occupied near Gentleman Jack.

As there was no night-clerk kept at Kate's Kitchen, no one had seen them go out, and in some way they had gotten the best of Gentleman Jack.

To show that this must be the case, he produced a bottle half full of chloroform, which he had found on the floor in the strangers' room.

That convinced all that these four men, for revenge, had remained at the hotel, and, chloroforming Gentleman Jack, had lowered him and his traps from the window, then gotten his horses from the stable and carried off their victim.

To attempt to follow trails three days old, and not knowing which way the gang had gone, was even beyond the power of Buffalo Bill, Surgeon Powell and the splendid lot of trailers with them.

They, however, started forth upon the search for some trace of Gentleman Jack, and the whole force in the camps turned out to help them.

Thus three days passed away, and in fruitless search, for the stranger could not be found, nor any trace of the exiled Dozen.

They, too, had taken their orders as meant, getting well out of the mines in the quickest time possible.

Keen Kit started out upon his trip once more, and soon after it was found that Poker had disappeared.

His mule was not in the stable, and he had departed almost as mysteriously as the stranger had, only Poker had forgotten the little matter of settling his bill.

At this forgetfulness on his part, however, Lady Kate said nothing, while Scotty remarked:

"Gentleman Jack overpaid us double what the darky beat us out of, Lady Kate, so you hain't out of pocket."

"Yes, but did Gentleman Jack pay it—was that card which you, fool-like, destroyed, in his handwriting?" said Lady Kate.

Upon this Scotty was dumb, not knowing, as he had kept neither the card or the envelope, only the money holding any charm for him.

That evening Buckskin Sam and Colorado Carl expressed a determination to leave in the morning.

"Not going back to Texas so soon?" asked Buffalo Bill.

"No, we are going to take a run through the northwestern plains."

"Well, you will surely give us a call at Fort Grand?"

"If possible, with pleasure."

"I hope you will make it possible," said Surgeon Powell, and he added: "We did hope to

interest you with us in a trail we are on, or rather trying to find."

"I regret exceedingly we cannot join you," was Colorado Carl's reply, and as good as their word the two Texan pards departed next morning.

Soon after news came from a miner that the two Indians, Panther Foot and Night Eyes had not been seen since the night of the trial and hanging.

Their cabin was found open and nothing in it, and yet no one had heard them express an intention of leaving the camps.

Then, after a talk over the matter their going was also attributed to the Exiled Dozen.

They were known to be unfriendly toward the Indians, and their not being found was set down to the revenge of the Exiled Dozen upon them, and Keen Kit remarked:

"Waal, them fellers did kinder git in the'r revenge all round arter all."

"But woe be unto any of 'em ef I ever sees 'em, fer I shall shoot to kill and even up things on my pard Gentleman Jack that they done fer."

"I is on ther trail, hotter than a wolf, from now until I hands in my chips, and you jist write down what I says, pards."

Whether any one wrote it down or not, they knew that Keen Kit meant all that he said, and if in his going and coming, he should strike any of the Exiled Dozen, all of whom he knew well, somebody would hand in their chips at call.

So matters still stood one week after the disappearance of Gentleman Jack, when Buffalo Bill and his pards sat out upon the piazza of Kate's Kitchen waiting for the coming in of Kit on his coach.

"Well, Bill, we have done nothing by coming here after all, for Bandbox Bill has not shown up as we hoped he would," said Surgeon Powell.

"No, and I guess we had better go back, hang on the trail for the road-agents, follow them to camp and go in for the rescue of Miss Heloise."

"Just what I was thinking, Cody."

"Well, Doc, we'll start to-morrow."

"So be it; but were you not disappointed that Buckskin Sam and Colorado Carl did not accompany us?"

"Greatly, but then they are off on some trail of their own, I feel certain."

"Yes, and the negro, Poker?"

"Was as great a mystery to me as was Gentleman Jack—but there sounds Kit's horn," and as Buffalo Bill spoke the winding notes of the stage-horn were heard, and soon after the coach dashed in sight, Kit holding the reins, for his wound was healing rapidly.

CHAPTER L.

NEWS FOR BUFFALO BILL.

THE coach came up with its usual rush, whatever loading it may have done on the road, and Kit, seeing the scouts, called out quickly:

"Any news o' Gentleman Jack, pards?"

"Not a word, Kit."

"Waal, I are sorry and gittin' sorrier; but I has news fer you, Buf'ler Bill."

"For me, Kit?"

"Yas, and sutbin' aside."

"I give it to yer soon as I hev got ther dust o' travel out o' my throat, and kin hev a talk with yer alone, thet are whar ther ears o' cur'us people won't hearken unto me."

Kit then went in with his passengers, four in number, and introduced them in his usual style to Lady Kate, and then made the introduction doubly sure by presenting her to them in his characteristic way.

As for Scotty he never any more noticed that interesting individual than he would a pen and ink for which he had no use.

From the office he adjourned to the bar of the Queen of Hearts, for the hotel had no bar, and after a very generous drink, walked up to the scout's room where he had told Buffalo Bill he would join them.

"Sit down, Kit, and tell us what news you have," said Buffalo Bill, who, with Surgeon Powell, was waiting for him.

"Pard Bill, I were coming along inter ther Bad Lands, when I seen a horseman in ther trail."

"Of course I set him down as a road-agent, and concluded he was not lonesome, havin' plenty o' company."

"Then, too, I seen he had a heavy coat on and it were buttoned up close around his neck as though it was cold weather with him."

"He had a mask on beside, and I concluded thet he were in a bad way, but thet I were in a wuss fix, fer I hed some cash along with me this trip."

"He showed no weepion, and called out as I came up:

"Hold on, pard, ef yer be Keen Kit."

"I be thet gent," says I.

"Waal, I hes a message fer yer," says he.

"Out with it, Pard Shameface," says I.

"He laughed a leetle and said:

"Now I wants you ter tell Buffalo Bill thet one who knows him well sends him this package, and wants him ter foller directions."

"Ef Buf'ler Bill hain't at Hallelujah, then

let me know next time yer come along by a string tied 'round this tree.

"If he be thar, then don't tie ther string.

"Then, too, ef Doc Powell be thar he'll do as well as Buf'ler Bill.

"Good-by, Kit."

"With this he tossed me up this package and rode away."

As Kit spoke he handed out a package which was sealed and addressed:

"To BUFFALO BILL,

"Chief of Scouts,

"or

"FRANK POWELL,

"The Surgeon Scout."

"The handwriting of the Texan Ranchero, as I live, Bill," cried Powell.

"Yes, Doc, now we will have some news."

He opened the package as he spoke and took out a well-drawn map, in pencil, with trails, rivers, valleys and mountains plainly marked upon it.

In the map was a letter, and Buffalo Bill read it aloud as follows:

"MY DEAR PARTS:—

"I have been working like a beaver, and am very nearly ready to strike.

"I have made discoveries that are important, but have a certain work to carry out to make a clean sweep sure.

"I send you herewith a map of the scene of operations.

"The place marked with *one star* is where I wish you to place Captain Taylor and his cavalry, at your earliest convenience.

"The spot marked with *two stars* is where I wish your scouts to camp, and the trails leading to them you will find marked on the map.

"The trail leading to the northwest is the one I am now to take, and you will see that it winds back to where *three stars* are to be found, and there I have my own force, not very far from you.

"The spot marked with *four stars* is the retreat of the Toll-Takers, and the trails leading therefrom are the only ones they now take for their lawless work.

"Get your soldiers in position, herd your scouts in their retreat, and be ready to move when my couriers come for them.

"My couriers, if you do not know them, will bring a *Crimson Star* as a pledge of good faith, so follow them blindly, and I pledge you my honor that outlawry will be utterly wiped out on the Overland Trails in this part of the country and Miss Hembold will not only be rescued again, but will have no fear of further molestation from Monte Miranda, the Mexican, for he is the one who is chief now.

"Yours to command,

"THE TEXAN RANCHERO."

The reception of this letter delighted both Surgeon Powell and Buffalo Bill immensely.

Wild Bill and Texas Jack were sent for, and had it read to them, and all were in good humor over the fact that their famous ally in the past, Bandbox Bill, had not only not deserted them, but was on the war-path in deadliest earnest, and pledged his honor that all would be well.

"We must take the back trail to-morrow, Doc."

"Yes, Bill."

"And we will go quickly so as to attract no attention, telling Lady Kate late to-night, and getting off before dawn."

"That will be best," responded Surgeon Powell, and the scouts began their preparations at once.

The next morning when Kit drove off on his coach, four horsemen followed behind him in the gray of early dawn, and they were the scouts of the Crimson Star, and they went forth with every hope now of success, for the Texan Ranchero was not the man to make an idle pledge.

"And he'll keep his pledge, Bill," said Surgeon Powell, "if he ever returns from among the Mormons, for it is there where he has gone."

CHAPTER LI.

THE RED-SKIN MESSENGER.

CAPTAIN JACK CRAWFORD, commanding the scouts in the absence of Buffalo Bill, was getting rather anxious about his chief and those with him.

He was also becoming impatient to be at work on the trail, and knowing well the terrors of Hallelujah City, and that Buffalo Bill was not a man to brook insult, he began to dread evil when one morning the four men rode into camp.

"Come, Jack, we have news and must move, as there is work ahead; but I must confess through no act of ours has the discovery been made," said Buffalo Bill.

"By whom then, chief?" asked Jack Crawford.

"By our Unknown ally whom I told you had taken the trail."

"We had heard nothing of him and supposed he had given up, when I got a letter, with maps for our guide and all information."

"Then we move at once?"

"Yes, up to a retreat he has selected, and where I hope we won't have to wait long before we are called upon to act."

That afternoon the scouts rode away from their camp and the next day reached the encampment of Captain Taylor's command.

The captain was shown the letter and the map,

and he, with Surgeon Powell, Lieutenant Ames, and Buffalo Bill held a council, the result of which was that both scouts and soldiers broke camp the following morning and took the trails marked in the Texan ranchero's map for their respective retreats.

Arriving there, they found the places well chosen and most secure, and there was a trail of some one having lately been there on horse-back.

The scouts' retreat was within fifteen miles of the old stronghold of the Toll-Takers, and none of them had suspected that the outlaws would be bold enough to establish themselves in that unlucky camp.

The soldiers were, in another direction, equally as far from the Valley of the Shadow of Death as were the scouts, and an examination of the map sent by the secret ally showed that the positions were well chosen for a combined sweep down upon the stronghold of the Toll-Takers.

The morning after their arrival in camp, the soldier on duty challenged a man approaching.

He was an Indian, and came with a letter, while around his neck was a ribbon of buckskin upon which was pinned the Crimson Star.

"Talking-paper for big chief," was all that the Indian said, and he handed over his letter.

Captain Taylor, to whom it was addressed, broke the seal and read:

"DEAR SIR:—Please keep your men close in camp even if they have to go on short rations of fresh meat.

"The enemy passes and repasses near you, and to have him know of your presence would spoil all."

"CRIMSON STAR."

About the same time that the Indian came into camp, Surgeon Powell, who had gone with the scouts to their retreat, returned.

He said to Captain Taylor, after reading the letter:

"An arrow with just such a note attached was shot into Bill's camp last night, and doubtless the same Indian fired it."

"What is he, Taylor?"

"A Sioux."

"He wears a Crimson Star?"

"Yes."

"Where is he?"

"I sent him to get some dinner."

"Orderly, send that Indian here, and Powell, you understand Sioux, so can make some inquiries of him," said Captain Taylor.

In a short while the orderly returned to say that the Sioux had passed right on out of camp and was nowhere to be found.

"Order some men to mount and give chase—"

"No, no, captain, for it is best to follow the injunction in this letter," said Surgeon Powell quickly.

"You are right, Powell; we will let him go and lie close, for I guess this man knows fully what he is about, and just what he wishes us to do to aid him," responded Surgeon Powell.

Over in the scouts' camp the missive, shot in by an arrow, created about the same feeling as in the soldiers' encampment, and Buffalo Bill gave orders that no man should go a hundred yards from where they were bivouacking.

The letter was just in time, too, to check Buffalo Bill's making a trip to the place marked by the ranchers as the spot where his own foes were encamped.

The first letter to him had said nothing about not coming over to his camp, and the chief of scouts was curious to see just who the Texan had as allies.

But the last letter checked him in this intention, and he determined to rest content until some word came from the ranchero.

The scout knew that there were many dangers to fear in that country, for they were not so very far removed from the Indian village, and also from the Mormons.

It is still fresh in the minds of many old people how bitter the Mormons were against all those who were not of their creed.

Driven from place to place, they at last settled in Utah and became hostile to all Gentiles.

Where they had expected to remain unmolested in that trackless wilderness, the gold-fever of California soon sent wagon-trains marching across the continent, and then came the cruel deeds of the Danites against all who wended their way westward, and history will never be written to tell of the lives lost on those red trails, the assassination of entire trains of emigrants.

The Danites, forced to show some respect to law at last, some of them took to the trails as outlaws, and the soldiers had three elements to battle with upon the frontier, Indians, outlaws and the wild element of lawless society such as would be found in Hallelujah City and scores of other mining-camps of a like character.

With Indians to look out for, a Mormon Danite element to dread, and the outlaws to hunt down, and which were friendly to both Danites and red-skins, Buffalo Bill and his men fully realized the peril of their position, and the odds which the mysterious man who had taken upon himself the rescue of Heloise Hembold, and, as

they believed, Belle Braddock, had to confront and conquer.

So it was that Buffalo Bill was determined to place no stone in the way of the ranchero, but with full trust in his daring and skill, to wait for him to go about the good work in his own fearless way.

CHAPTER LII.

THE DANITE'S PLEDGE.

THE Mormon Mountain Patrol, going the rounds of the trails within a certain circuit of their dearly-loved city, came to a halt as they beheld a horseman seated in his saddle some hundred yards away, calmly awaiting their coming.

The appearance of both horse and rider were striking, and the Mormon Patrol, some dozen in number, halted and regarded him closely, their weapons ready to greet a foe if need be.

The horse was as black as ink from head to foot, and the rider was clad in a sable cloak, black pants, and a slouch hat of the same somber hue.

He had on also a mask of black, which completely shielded his face and neck, while sable gauntlet-gloves covering his hands, it was utterly impossible to tell whether he was pale-face, red-skin or negro.

As the Mormon Patrol halted, the strange horseman suddenly raised his arms and made a peculiar gesture three times.

Instantly the leader of the Mormon Patrol answered with another gesture, and then rode forward alone.

He seemed to feel no fear now, and the stranger in black also advanced to meet him.

"I greet you, chief," said the Patrol captain, saluting politely by bending in his saddle.

"I desire to go at once to the Prophet, so beg you to send one of your men to notify him of my coming."

"The name, chief?" asked the Patrol, politely.

"I care not to send my name to the Prophet."

"He will not give audience to any one unknown by name, chief."

"Then say that El Monte, the Mexican Danite, seeks audience," was the stern response.

The Patrol captain again saluted, and calling to one of his men dispatched him in haste to the city to bear the message to the Prophet that El Monte, the Mexican Danite, wished an audience and was following upon his, the courier's, trail, to hear the pleasure of the mighty leader of his people, as to whether he would give him audience or not.

It was after dark when the masked horseman halted in the outskirts of the city, where he was to await the coming of the Mormon Patrol, who had gone as courier to the Prophet.

At length, as he sat in silent patience upon his horse, he heard the clatter of hoofs, and soon a horseman came in sight.

It was the Patrol, and he suspected that the Prophet would give the Danite chief special and private audience that night at nine o'clock.

"It is just what I wished," muttered the Danite, as he rode slowly on his way, for he would just reach the Prophet's quarters about the time specified if he did not hurry.

It was no new thing for one who did not wish to be known, to go masked to the Prophet's quarters, if he first sent notification of his wish to do so, therefore the coming of the Danite attracted no especial attention from the guard when he appeared.

"Say to the Prophet that the Mexican Danite is without," he said in a tone of command, and the message was sent in.

Ten minutes after the visitor was admitted to the presence of the mighty head of the Mormon Church.

If others were near they were not visible, and the Prophet sat in a position with his back to a door, where, in case there was need of a hasty egress it could be made in a second of time.

Then between the Prophet and his visitor there was a table semicircular in shape, rather high, and with the outer side curtained around, so as only the shoulders and head of one seated in the chair were visible.

It might have been accident, perhaps design, but it answered the purpose of being a safeguard against sudden attack should an unwelcome visitor gain admission by some means to the august presence of the Mormon leader.

"You desired secret audience with me?" said the Prophet, in a voice that was stern, yet not unkind.

"I did, prophet."

"You are the man whom I allowed to go upon a special mission; under pledges of yours to accomplish certain ends, but from whom I have had no word direct, though my spies have told me the career you had entered upon."

"You are El Monte, the Mexican Danite, whom I made a chief, and you have come to seek mercy from me for the wrong you have done me and my people."

"I so sent my name to you, Prophet, that I might be sure of an audience with you; but I am not El Monte, though I come to you with news of him," was the reply, in a deep, even

"Unmask in the presence of your chief, then, that I may behold your face!"

"First, my Prophet, let me say to you that you have trusted men whom you believed to be true, who were your foes.

"Let me ask you to bear with me while I tell you that Monte Miranda was never your friend, never a true Danite, but used your church as a means to his own ends.

"A fortune which he could not secure unless he married his cousin, he has endeavored to gain through that marriage.

"He is a Mexican, and yet a fugitive from his own people.

"His cousin is an American, and despises him, but he has persecuted her, kidnapped her, and is striving to force her into a marriage with him to gain the fortune I refer to."

"And is she the one whom he had here with him, whom he wedded according to our church?" asked the Prophet.

The masked man started at this and replied: "I knew not that he wedded any one here, Prophet."

"He did, for he came here with a beautiful girl from California, he said.

"She, in the disguise of a boy, went with him on this secret mission, which was, I will say to you, for you are in my power, to hunt down all those who are traitors to our church.

"He convinced me that he could do this work, and would have to perhaps pretend to be an outlaw to accomplish it, and so he went from me armed with secret papers for his purpose, and his Mormon wife accompanied him, for her parents, she told me were Mormons, and I knew that her mother had been.

"Now you tell me that this man, El Monte as I knew him, is false to me, to our church."

"He is, my Prophet, for he is secretly the chief, under the name of Major Mephisto, of the band of Toll-Takers in the mountains and upon the trails."

"What proof have you of this?"

"The proof that he kidnapped from Fort Grand the daughter of an army officer, his cousin that I referred to, and now holds her as a prisoner there, to force her to wed him.

"Once he has done this he will seek to gain his fortune and go to other lands, becoming untrue to his church, his Prophet and the woman through whom he gains the inheritance."

"Prove this, and he shall die under the Danite execution law for traitors," sternly said the Prophet.

"I pledge myself to give you that proof, my Prophet," was the firm response of the masked Danite.

CHAPTER LIII.

UNMASKED.

THE Mormon Prophet was evidently impressed with his masked visitor, and said, after he had heard his pledge:

"Now let me see if I can trust to that pledge after I have seen your face, Danite."

"My Prophet, I yet claim your forbearance while I speak of myself now, ere I unmask."

"I grant it, for you must know that you are like a fly in the web of a spider at my mercy here."

"I am a Danite, my chief, so know all.

"But I would ask you if you remember your old Danite officer, Captain Branch?"

"Know him? How can I forget one who proved a true friend to me at one time, and then a traitor, black-hearted and vile?" savagely said the Prophet.

"My Prophet, there were two men to play these parts, one to be true, the other to be treacherous."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that there were two men—the good one and the bad one."

"I do not understand you."

"Captain Branch had a twin-brother."

"Ah!"

"The resemblance between them in face and form was so perfect that their parents did not know them apart."

"I have known such cases."

"But their hearts were different, for one was true, the other evil."

"Well, sir, well?"

And the Prophet seemed to be growing uneasy.

"One of these brothers was won over to the Mormon Church, and he became your trusted leader."

"Yes, and I made him a Danite chief."

"You did, my Prophet, and he endeavored to serve you well."

"But then again crossed his path this twin-brother."

"From boyhood the wicked brother had wronged the one whose life was honorable, and meeting again in after life he again sought to ruin him."

"He had bought his secrets of the Danite League, and gained them by his resemblance to his brother, and then followed all manner of cruel and evil acts under the guise of this brother's name."

"That brother he put out of the way so that he could not appear against him, and he ven-

tured into your sacred city here under the guise of a true Danite.

"He became the lieutenant of the band of outlaws of which El Monte is now captain, and upon the death of the leader, Major Mephisto, he stepped into his place.

"He claimed that his band were Danites, and thus cast dishonor upon your name, Prophet, and the name of Mormon, and brought upon him the United States Army, which ended in the almost complete annihilation of the band."

"And he was killed, I was glad to know."

"Yes, my Prophet, he was killed."

"And this brother, whom you claim was the true Danite?"

"Was hidden away in Texas, and the evil one came there and worked all the ruin he could."

"Then the true Danite was not killed?"

"The one who had suffered so much wrong at the hands of his wicked brother was not killed, as it was plotted and planned that he should be."

"Then his life was to have been taken?"

"Yes, Prophet, his life was to have been taken by his evil brother, who plotted his assassination, and believed when he came back from Texas that the work had been done; but the assassin did not accomplish his work."

"I am most thankful that the one who proved so false to his Prophet and his church was killed."

"Remember, Prophet, that but one of these brothers was a real Danite, the other simply playing the part of one from his resemblance to his brother, and the secrets he thus gained about the Danite League."

"It is well then that he lost his life, for that sealed his lips forever."

"True, Prophet, his lips are sealed, and his secret died with him."

"And you?"

"I am, Prophet, your Danite chief."

The Prophet sprung to his feet as the mask was removed, and then gazed sternly into the face of the man before him.

"Can such a resemblance be possible?" he muttered, more to himself than to the man he gazed so fixedly upon.

"Here is an ambrotype, Prophet, of my brother and myself, taken together when we were seventeen."

"Can you tell them apart?"

He handed over the case as he spoke, and the Prophet gazed upon it in almost awe.

"It appears to be one person," he said, in a low tone.

"It does, Prophet, and you note the resemblance to myself?"

"It is perfect, in spite of the years."

"Can you say which one is the true and the false, then, Prophet?"

"Upon my life I cannot."

"The one on the right, sir."

"I could not tell, for there is simply no difference."

"Except, Prophet, I feel glad to know that my life has not been what my unfortunate brother's was."

"Ah, yes; but what a strange story is all this that you have told me, yet I cannot doubt it. I cannot doubt you now, Captain Branch, and welcome you back as from your grave."

"Your hand, Captain Branch, and my congratulations upon your escape."

The Prophet came around from behind his desk and grasped the hand of the man whom he believed to be the real Danite chief.

Then he asked:

"And you have given me your pledge to place in my power El Monte, the traitor Danite?"

"I shall do my duty, Prophet, and El Monte shall either be given over to the Danite executioners, wearing your badge of sentence, or be slain, for, should he resist my power, he must die then and there."

"Yes, but as a traitor he should suffer the penalty, and there must be an example of such men as he or our power will wane."

"It shall be as you wish, Prophet, unless I be compelled to end his career by the bullet."

"Should I lose my life, sir, it would be well for you to put your entire Patrol force upon the wiping out of this outlaw band, for there are other Danites than the Mexican among them."

"Then all must suffer, for outlawry among my people shall be put down," vehemently said the Prophet.

Then he added:

"But I have hopes of your having a long life, Captain Branch, after the perils you have survived, and I will honor you most highly yet."

"All I ask now, Prophet, is full authority to bring El Monte and the other Danites in the outlaw band to justice."

"You shall have my hand, seal, and the secret insignia."

"I feel honored, my Prophet, and could hardly ask so much."

"Believe me, at my hands, your interests shall never suffer."

"I feel that; but now let me ask you to become my guest?"

That honor the visitor declined, but, without resuming his mask left the room and went

to a hotel, where the next day he received orders to again visit the Prophet.

When he left Salt Lake City that night, he held full authority as a Danite chief; but it is hardly necessary to tell the reader that the real Danite, the wicked twin brother, Branch Bainbridge, was in his grave, and that the one who had gained the secrets of the League, through his resemblance to that brother, yet gained them for no evil purpose, the one who had dared to play the bold part he had before the Mormon Prophet, was none other than Mortimer Bainbridge, the Texan ranchero, he who had been known as Bandbox Bill, the Bravo in Broadcloth, and who was playing his cards boldly to rescue from Monte the Mexican's power his beautiful cousin, Heloise Hembold.

CHAPTER LIV.

THE RANCHERO'S DARING LEAP.

MANY things have been laid at the Mormons' doors of which they were never guilty, but there is no doubt that the lawless men of their creed were guilty of hundreds of acts of cruelty which would have brought them to the gallows if known.

Fleeing from the persecution and prosecution which their Mormon creed brought upon them, after establishing themselves in Utah, many of their men resorted to deeds to keep off the hand of the law from their throat, which in the end but hastened to bring them within its grasp.

They made friends with the Indian tribes, which were hostile to all other whites but Mormons, and the Danite Patrols made the country and the trails a terror to settlers and wagon-trains.

The march of civilization they tried to stay and turn back, and the Star of Empire moving westward was kept constantly clouded.

With people taken from all creeds and conditions of life and brought into the Mormon church, an espionage was necessary upon them and there was, consequently, a Secret Service system under the chiefs that was perfect.

If a man was trusted, a spy was set upon him to prove his worthiness to such trust.

So it was that a spy dogged the steps of the pretended Danite captain when he left Salt Lake City.

This he was well aware of, and also that no mean trailer would be put upon his track, while an equally as good man would be just as likely to follow the spy to see that he did his duty.

With civilization opening up the country about him, the United States Army pushing its outposts and forts further and further into the Indian country, the Prophet was anxious to give the Government no reason for complaint, and the Mormon Patrols were kept trailing the mountains, valleys and plains to put down lawlessness.

Yet in spite of this, outlaw bands infested the Overland trails, whether of coach or wagon-trains, and the Danites often got credit for outrages of which they were guiltless.

This explanation of life in and around Mormon-land as it then was, will show the reader that the man who was playing the part of a Danite chief, through an accident that gave him the chance, if he had the daring, was doing a bold thing indeed, and which would bring him to a fearful death if detected.

To guard against the spy upon his track, the Texan ranchero had to devise some plan, where he could give him the slip and yet excite no suspicion against himself.

The orders of the spy were to see that the Danite captain entered the retreat of the outlaw band of Toll-Takers.

The orders of the spy upon the spy were to see that the trailer formed no alliance with the Danite captain, as Mortimer Bainbridge was supposed to be.

Knowing Danite laws, as he had heard them from Colorado Carl, who, as a United States detective had turned Danite to carry out his plans, and from his resemblance to his brother, who had become a Mormon, enabling him to have experience as a supposed "member in good standing," Mortimer Bainbridge was well aware that he would be tracked out of Salt Lake.

He cared not to go to the retreat of the Toll-Takers, until he had first gone to his own, and so he must throw the trailer off his trail.

This was no easy task, for he knew that he was close behind him, and the spy had the authority to call any of the Mormon Patrol to his aid if he needed them.

He was not the man to shoot him without the best of cause, and looking to the future, and his promise to the Prophet, he wished to do no harm to the Mormon people, or church, and, after he had accomplished his object, to simply disappear, leaving what construction they pleased to put upon his disappearance.

He intended to only use his knowledge of the secret laws of the Danites as a means to an end, and nothing more.

So he must get rid of his trailer by no harsh means.

As night drew near, he began to plot and plan.

His trailer, he knew, had a couple of hounds, held in leash, on his trail, so that darkness would be of no avail to escape from him.

Then it flashed upon him that a swift-flowing stream dashed through a canyon, along which the trail ran that he was following.

Colorado Carl had told him that once as he was riding along there his horse became frightened, reared and forced two other horses off the narrow ledge, then went over himself, with him on his back.

The three animals, with their riders, had gone deep beneath the flood, but rising they had been borne along swiftly down the stream for over half a mile, nothing but walled banks of rock presenting themselves, with no chance of landing.

But at last he had discerned on the other shore a crevice in the rocky bank, and made for it, the others following.

He had gained a footing, as had the others, and all had gone out through the ravine to *terra firma*.

The nature of the country was such that it was a twenty-mile ride before they could rejoin their comrades, who had watched their fall and struggle for life with deepest interest.

When passing this very ledge trail with Colorado Carl one day, he had heard the story from him, and now the daring man determined to get rid of his trailer right at that point.

He went along more rapidly until he came to the trail along the narrow ledge.

He had watched for the spot where Colorado Carl and his comrades had gone over, and he saw that the ledge was broken there, with marks of where iron-shod hoofs had slid down it to the edge and off into the river twenty feet below.

In fact the spot was one which it needed carefulness to pass with an animal.

Dismounting, the ranchero, with his knife, made other marks upon the rocks, to appear like a struggle there by a horse to regain his footing, and then he folded his weapons in his india-rubber blankets to protect them from wetting, and mounting prepared for the leap.

His well-trained horse watched his proceedings with considerable interest, for he seemed to feel that something out of the usual run was before him.

When the ranchero mounted again, strapping his bundle of weapons behind his saddle, the splendid black horse grew a trifle nervous.

But when urged toward the spot he did not hesitate.

Arriving there the Texan suddenly wheeled his horse hard to the left, drove his spurs deep, and with a loud snort of pain, fright and anger combined, the splendid animal took the leap from the ledge.

CHAPTER LV.

THE RETREAT OF THE RANCHERO.

The daring Texan had calculated well, in his splendid leap, in the way he made his horse take the jump.

The animal went down heavily, and struck the water a hard blow, his rider still in the saddle.

Under he went, until the head of the rider disappeared.

But only for an instant, for then the horseman reappeared, the head and neck of the animal came next, and, after one bewildered moment, he was headed down the stream, with an oblique toward the other shore.

The ravine was reached, and could only be seen by close observation, a tiny stream flowing into the river there.

The horse gained a footing when close ashore, and soon after staggered out and up into the narrow ravine.

Leaving the animal there to rest after his great exertions, the Texan clambered to the top of a cliff, and gazed over upon the other shore.

Half a mile above he beheld the Trailer, and he had halted at the spot where he had taken the leap.

He held the rein of his horse, so had evidently walked along the ledge, leading the animal.

The two dogs were there, too, but did not go beyond to follow his trail.

It ended there at the place he had taken the leap, and they knew it.

The trailer was earnestly regarding the spot, and seemed to arrive at the correct conclusion, that the man he trailed had gone over there on horseback.

But when, by an accidental slip of his horse, or through design, of course the Texan could not tell.

After some time spent at the spot, the man slowly turned his horse around on the ledge and retraced his way, followed by the dogs, for they seemed to feel that there was no further use for them on the trail they had followed to that point.

Then the Texan returned to his horse, and mounting, rode at a rapid pace for several miles, when he halted in a deep canyon near a spring.

His horse was at once staked out, his saddle and bridle hung on the limb of a tree, and a fire built almost under them.

Then taking other clothing from his saddlebags, he began to dry his things and cooked supper while waiting.

His blankets and weapons, wrapped in the

rubber blankets and securely tied, were perfectly dry, along with a change of clothing, so that he did not suffer much inconvenience from his ducking.

Retiring early, after throwing more wood upon the fire, he passed the night without interruption, and awoke to find his saddle and traps all dry.

Mounting, he rode on his way at a rapid pace, and a couple of hours brought him to the edge of a precipice upon which grew a dense fringe of undergrowth.

To any one watching him it would seem that he was going to ride directly over the cliff into a foaming torrent below; but the horse passed through a fringe of undergrowth to find a descending ledge of rock which sloped gently along the cliff-side until it entered a miniature valley below.

The scene that broke upon his view was a striking one.

The entrance to the valley was barricaded by a couple of saplings, and in the space beyond, where the grass was thick, long and luxurious, eight horses were visible feeding.

One gave a low neigh as he appeared, which was answered by the animal he rode, and they were a perfect match.

There was also a large-limbed mule in the little valley, and lying near a camp-fire were two enormous black dogs, and they sprang up as they saw the visitor and rushed toward him with every indication of delight at his coming.

Back under the steep hillside among the shelter of the pines, were several wicky-ups, and there were visible five persons gathered about a camp-fire.

One of these, a negro, was engaged in cooking breakfast, and it was none other than the plucky colored man who had been known in Hallelujah City as Poker, but in Texas, on Overlook Ranch, he bore the more Christian name of Lucas.

There were two Indians seated near the fire, watching patiently, but with considerable interest the doings of Poker, and they were Panther Foot and Night Eyes, while upon a *serape* spread near were the well-known Texan Rangers, Buckskin Sam and Colorado Carl.

In fact, the camp was the secret retreat of the Texan Ranchero, and it would have taken the whole Sioux tribe to find the well-hidden spot.

The neigh of the horse attracted the attention of the men in camp, but they seemed to feel no dread of discovery or attack then, though they were prepared for any emergency.

They all turned toward the Texan as he appeared and welcomed him warmly, while, after thanking them, he said:

"Well, pard, all seems to go our way just now, and to-morrow we move into position, for I shall enter the camp of the Toll-Takers."

"Too big chances for you to take, chief," said Buckskin Sam.

"No, for I shall go prepared with an authority which Monte Miranda will acknowledge, and I will be glad to have this trail come to an end."

"And so will I," Buckskin Sam said earnestly.

"And you will accomplish your work, chief, I'll wager high, before we reach the end of the trail."

"Yes, I believe that I will; but the most dangerous work is before me."

"Yet you have been to Salt Lake City?"

"Yes, I left the Prophet yesterday."

"That was desperate enough danger for any man to take chances on, and yet you say the work ahead is worse?"

"Yes, Sam, but I believe it will pan out just as I wish."

"You, I wish to-morrow to go to the army camp under Captain Taylor, and lead him to his position, which you know in the Valley of the Shadow of Death, while you, Carl, can take Buffalo Bill and his scouts to the other end of the valley, and then both of you are to come to the ridge over the outlaw camp and join Panther Foot, Night Eyes, and Poker, where I will leave them."

"When all is ready I will come to you, and Panther Foot and Night Eyes can soon have the scouts and soldiers close in upon the outlaws, and I'll only give the word to do so when I'm certain that there shall be no mistake."

Such was the plan of the Texan ranchero, and the next day they broke camp and moved upon the trail that was to unfold the Toll-Takers in their net.

CHAPTER LVI.

COLORADO CARL EXPLAINS.

THE move made by both the scouts and the soldiers, to the new position chosen by the Texan ranchero, proved to them that something was to be done without much loss of time.

They remembered, most of them, how the mysterious man had on a former occasion had things go his way without a single break, other than the escape of Monte Miranda, and that was not his fault.

He knew what he was about, and they were willing to put the utmost confidence in him.

There was one thing that struck Buffalo Bill and others strangely, and Surgeon Powell

struck the keynote of their thoughts when he said:

"How strange it seems, Bill, for you to be following the lead of another on the border where scouting and trailing is concerned!"

"It has so struck me, Doc, but do you know I am willing to yield in my judgment to that man without a word."

"He does all in a mysterious way, but there is no mystery about his gaining his point."

"Somehow it strikes me he is like you in his actions."

So many thought, for the Surgeon Scout had a way about him of mystery when he was carrying out any important object.

The next night a horseman rode into the scouts' camp, and Buffalo Bill at once recognized Colorado Carl, whom they had met at Hallelujah City.

He greeted him warmly and then asked:

"Now, Carl, where is Sam, and how is it we find you all alone coming upon our camp, which we supposed no one knew of?"

Colorado Carl laughed and responded:

"Your camp was known to me, Buffalo Bill, for I selected the position."

"You?"

"Yes, for I know this country pretty well."

"Ah! then you are in league with the Texan ranchero?"

"About that."

"Carl, you are a dandy, for I never suspected it."

"I told you at Hallelujah City we had a little trail of our own to follow, and we came up this way."

"Then you and Sam are both with the Texan?"

"Yes, and the two Indians you saw there."

"Panther Foot and Night Eyes, who stood ready to back us up in the row?"

"Yes in which we stood by that splendid fellow Gentleman Jack?"

"Yes, the same red-skins."

"And I suppose you will tell me next that Poker the negro was one of your party?"

"It is so."

"Well, Carl, you surprise me, for I never suspected such a thing I assure you."

"Our chief is a man of mystery."

"I grant that; but where is he now?"

"In the Toll-Takers' camp."

"No."

"It is a fact."

"They'll kill him."

"Somehow, Bill, I've come to think that man wears a charmed life, for I have seen him do things I would not attempt with twenty men at my back, and he never gets worsted."

"He is as strong as a lion and as fearless, and yet he never harms a man if he can help it, shooting to kill only when it is a case of life and death."

"Now do you know he has just come from Salt Lake City?"

"Do you mean it?"

"Yes."

"I hardly thought he would go there after his brother being looked upon as a Danite renegade."

"Well, go he did, and more, he went as his brother."

"They were exactly alike, you know, and he was determined to get full power from the Mormons to take Monte Miranda."

"He is not there."

"Oh, no, but it seems he went to Salt Lake City, told the Prophet a story about having been on a still hunt for traitors to the Mormon church, and got a special paper to go and arrest them, or execute them."

"This, of course, gave him a great deal of power, and he need have no fear from the Mormon quarter."

"So he organized his band, with a few of the old men, and new ones, and began his lawless life again."

"He has, however, a woman with him, one whom he married, by Mormon ceremony, in Salt Lake."

"Well, I cannot understand his wishing to capture Miss Hembold to marry her."

"Oh, he's a Mormon, you know, and besides he would have a way of getting around that."

"Well, I am glad for Miss Hembold's sake there is a woman there."

"So am I; but let me tell you that our chief got all of his information from the Prophet, for he went boldly to him, told the story of his having a wicked twin brother, showed an autograph of himself and his brother taken together, and implied that he was the good Danite."

"Where necessary, he made his brother fit into his place, and vice versa."

"At any rate, he left Salt Lake City as a Danite in good standing, and with orders to hunt down Monte Miranda and send him to the Danite League for punishment, and no one can tell what that will be who is not, as I am, a Danite."

"You a Danite?"

"Oh yes, but fallen from grace as a Danite now, for I turned Mormon years ago to carry out some detective work I had in hand."

"And the Texan got out of Salt Lake without suspicion?"

"On the contrary with honor, though of course he was followed by a spy, for that is their way, you know."

"He took a leap from a cliff into the river, which threw the spy trailer off his track and left his dogs at fault, and then came on to our camp, where we were awaiting him."

"This afternoon he started for the Toll-Takers' stronghold, and I am here to guide you to the head of the valley to-morrow night, for he will call in all the Toll-Takers into the trap, so as to catch the whole gang."

"Buckskin Sam has gone to Captain Taylor's command to guide them to-night, for they have a longer trail to take, to the other end of the Valley of the Shadow of Death, and when you are both in position you will not be one mile from the stronghold, and there will be but one way in which the Toll-Takers can escape. When I have taken you to your position, and Sam has guided Captain Taylor to his, we will both go and join the two Indians and Poker, where they now are, within a quarter of a mile of the stronghold, and wait for the signal from our chief."

"See, Bill?"

"Yes, I see, and the chief has certainly planned well."

"And will execute his plan equally as well," was the reply of Colorado Carl.

CHAPTER LVII.

AN UNWELCOME VISITOR.

MONTE MIRANDA, the Mexican, was making money—in his lawless way.

He considered a bird in the hand equivalent to a whole tree full at large, and as his men were doing well in their robberies, he put off his action regarding the forcing of Heloise Hembold into a marriage with him until a later day.

He lived so in the present he hardly had a thought of the future, and was anxious to get money enough ahead to appear in good style until he could get possession of the joint fortune with his cousin.

What Cleo Amidon had had he had quietly put away with his own earnings, and he took the lion's share of what the band brought in.

When he got ready to act he would pick a couple of his best men, and with Heloise and Cleo start for the stage-line at a point where he was not known to any of the drivers, and the Toll-Takers would awake to find themselves without a chief, and with most of their money gone.

That is, he would desert the band as though they held no claim upon him.

Heloise felt the days go by and no rescuers appear; but she did not give up hope.

Cleo was most kind to her, yet never permitted her out of her sight, and she knew there was ever a guard at hand within call if she attempted, as she often wished to do, to escape.

With Monte she kept up her sarcastic manner, calling him cousin with an air that was stinging to him.

Often he was away, but the surveillance was the same.

One day he returned in an ill-humor.

He had returned from an unsuccessful highway performance, and had lost two of his men, shot down by a stage-load of miners who would not submit to robbery as tamely as most people did.

He had found a trail too very near the Valley of the Shadow of Death, and the hoof-marks showed that the horses were shod.

This proved that they were not Indians, and therefore they must be either soldiers from Fort Grand, or Mormon Patrols, either of which he did not wish to have in his vicinity.

Thus it was he felt in ill-humor.

He had sent one of his men, too, on a special mission, and he had been gone for over two weeks.

But this man's return was reported to him soon after his arrival.

He at once sought the quarters of the men, who were now swelled to fourteen in number, two of them being red-skins who had joined the band, being renegades from their own tribe.

"Well, Brass, you are back again, I am glad to see, for I supposed you had been killed."

"I'm back, chief, but I had a hard time of it, and had to wait for my pard Kendrick."

"You got him, then?"

"Oh, yes, chief, he is in the cabin fixing up as a parson."

"He does look like one, then, as you said?"

"Jist wait and see him, chief, and you'll think he is a bishop."

"And the certificate?"

"Oh, he got that all right, in at the town."

"It must be regular."

"It is, sir, for Kendrick studied to be a parson, but fell from grace and became a lawyer, so he knows."

"And what did you say he was doing now?"

"Picking up a living, sir, as best he can."

"He's the very man to play parson— Oh, here he comes."

Just then there stepped out of the cabin a large man dressed in a suit of clerical-cut black.

He wore a white cravat and spectacles, his

face was smoothly-shaven, and his hair plastered close to his head.

He did indeed look like a preacher.

"Parson Kendrick, this is our chief of the Mormon Mountain Patrol, as I told you, and whom you are to marry to the lady he loves," said Brass.

"I greet thee kindly, my son, and verily do I honor thee for thy sacrifice in living afar in this wilderness to keep back savage hordes from civilization," said "Parson" Kendrick, in a deep, sepulchral voice, and with an affected whine.

Monte had told his hireling, Brass, that the man must believe he thought him a minister, and also that the Toll-Takers must be spoken of as Mormon Patrols.

So he greeted the old fraud with marked respect, and then said:

"After I return to my quarters, Brass, bring Parson Kendrick up and I'll present him to the ladies."

Then he returned to the quarters of Cleo and Heloise, and said to the latter:

"I wish to have a talk with you, my sweet cousin."

"Well, sir?" was the haughty response.

"I sent a man weeks ago to a large town on the Overland at great risk and expense, to secure the services of a clergyman."

"He has just returned, and with him is the Reverend Doctor Kendrick, who has brought a license with him, duly filled up and all."

"Now you know that you have my pledge, and Cleo is to go with us to see it carried out, that I am to have you as soon as we get possession of our property, thus enabling you to secure a divorce from me and be wholly free, besides having a large estate."

"You may now prepare to become my wife this afternoon."

"Monte Miranda, if you made it a question of marrying you, or dying, I would cheerfully choose death."

"What! you refuse?"

"Of course I do."

"It shall be death if you refuse, I swear it."

"Well, I will be avenged on you by knowing that I kept you from the fortune."

"Oh, no, for I will have the certificate of the parson that we were married, and in case of the death of one or the other of us, you know the will says the survivor is to get all."

"I'll be the survivor, and showing my certificate of marriage, and the parson's statement that he was with you in your dying hours, and buried you, that will be all I will need to give me my inheritance."

"And this man, who you say is a clergyman, will fall so low as to do this for you?"

"I will buy him, you know."

"Come now, do you accept my terms, or shall it be death to your share, Heloise Hembold?"

"I'll choose death rather," was the firm response.

"Chief, see there!" and a man dashed up to point out the coming of a horseman.

He had descended into the valley by the ridge trail, which was never guarded, and was quietly riding toward the quarters of Monte Miranda.

"My God! it is Captain Branch, the Danite, and our old chief!"

"I had hoped he was dead," almost groaned Monte Miranda, as his gaze fell upon the unwelcome visitor.

As for Heloise Hembold, his coming, outlaw though he had been proclaimed, was a relief to her, for it could be no worse for her than it was.

CHAPTER LVIII.

THE TEXAN HOLDS THE FORT.

HELOISE HEMBOLD knew nothing of the fact that the former chief of the Toll-Takers, Captain Branch, the renegade Danite, whose lieutenant Monte Miranda was, had had a twin brother.

The secret of how Mortimer Bainbridge had met that brother in the early dawn and killed him, not then knowing the man who was also firing upon him, and then, assuming his attire, had boldly impersonated him in the outlaw camp as chief, as told in the two preceding romances to this, Helen knew nothing of, only Surgeon Powell, Buffalo Bill and Captain Taylor being in the secret.

When he had placed the camp in the hands of the scouts and soldiers, Mortimer Bainbridge had mysteriously disappeared, and the outlaws believed that he had been killed, still thinking him their chief.

Monte Miranda, making his escape, had also known nothing of the deep game played by Mortimer Bainbridge, and seeing him coming had at once recognized, as he believed, his old outlaw chief, Captain Branch.

His first thought was to fire upon him, but in this he knew that he would not be supported by his men, some of whom had served under the Danite chief.

His next thought was to treat him with cordiality, and see if he could not still hold his grip as chief, or secretly arrange with Captain Branch, as he believed him to be, to take

the band, while he departed with Cleo and Heloise.

So he called out:

"Bravo, Chief Branch, I welcome you as one risen from the grave, for I deemed you dead."

"Yes, many have thought me dead, El Monte; but may I ask if you are chief here now?" was the response of the visitor, as he quietly dismounted.

"Well, yes, but of course I will yield to you, as having the prior claim, Captain Branch."

"Certainly; but you have some ladies here?"

"Yes; one is my wife who is to be, and the other is her friend, Miss Braddock—permit me to present you?"

"No, for I know Miss Hembold there, as the daughter of an army officer, and the other is Miss Cleo Amidon, of California, whom you made your wife."

"See here, Branch, I hope you have not come here to put on airs with me?"

"No, I have come to say that I am here by command of the Mormon Prophet."

"Bah! you are a renegade Danite, as I know."

"Well, let me show you that I have been pardoned for services rendered, and am now Colonel Branch, the Chief of the Danite Mountain Patrol."

"Hold! I am not here without good backing, and it is so good that I may say if you had fifty or a hundred men, instead of fifteen all told, I would be strong enough to carry my point."

"And why have you come?" demanded the Mexican now growing very pale.

Every word said had been heard by Heloise Hembold and Cleo Amidon, and they both listened breathlessly for the reply of the visitor to this momentous question.

"I am here, Monte, from the Prophet, to place you under arrest and take you to Salt Lake."

"I am here to capture those of you who do not die with arms in their hands, for I know that, except the two valley guards at each outpost, every man of your band is in this camp."

"Now call a man and send for the outposts, for I wish every one of your band here in camp this night."

"I refuse to obey you."

"Monte, don't make such a mistake, for let me say to you that the Prophet knows of your kidnapping Miss Hembold, and intends that she shall at once be restored to her father."

"Thank God!" broke from the lips of Heloise Hembold.

"The Prophet knows that you kidnapped her, to force her into a marriage with you, thus gaining possession in Mexico of that which you could in no other way lay claim to, unless in case of her death, which was very likely to occur, she might be certain."

"Now, Monte, for a Danite to refuse to obey the command of his Prophet, you know, as a Danite, sentences him to a death that is appalling."

"You must go with me, and trust to the clemency of the Prophet."

"His clemency," sneered the Mexican.

"It is your only chance."

"I have the chance of resistance."

"Try it," was the cool banter.

"You have no men with you."

"Call upon your men to rally around you, and see."

The Mexican stood undecided, for the coolness of the man nonplused him.

Then he saw Brass and the pretended preacher approaching, and he said:

"Brass, I wish my men here at once to make a prisoner of this Danite, who comes with a demand from the Prophet for we Danites to come to him!"

"If the Prophet commands, Captain Monte, I for one am not brave enough to refuse to obey, nor would I resist my old chief, Captain Branch."

"You are wise, Brass, and the other Danites in this band will yield as you do."

"Here are my papers as chief, from the Prophet, and I command you to send to the outposts and have them come here by sunset."

"The Prophet has been accused of aiding lawlessness on this frontier, and he is determined that all outlaws shall suffer."

"Obey me, Brass."

"I will, chief."

"But who is this man?"

And the Texan turned upon the fraudulent parson.

"I am an humble and lowly shepherd, sir, in the Christian fold," whined Kendrick.

"You are an infamous old fraud, sir, and for the crime you intended, by a false ceremony, to unite Miss Hembold to this villain Monte, I am inclined to think it will go very hard with you."

"Come, Branch, show your face, for I am master here," suddenly cried Monte, and he drew his revolver with a lightning-like movement, while Heloise cried out in alarm.

The Texan smiled blandly and said coolly:

"Look behind you and see if you are."

The Danite turned to look, and then came a sharp report and a bullet struck the revolver from his hand, shattering one of his fingers.

In an instant the Texan was upon him, and hurling him to the ground had his foot upon him.

Cleo drew her weapon too and would have fired, but Heloise struck it from her grasp, seized it and turned it upon her, while she cried:

"Don't force me to kill you, Cleo Amidon!"

CHAPTER LIX.

GENTLEMAN JACK AS A RESCUER.

"I THANK you, Miss Hembold, for your timely aid, as it prevented me shattering the pretty hand of that lady with a bullet. Parson, come here!"

So said the Texan after the brave act of Heloise Hembold, who still held Cleo Amidon covered with her revolver.

The parson, in dire fright, was only too glad to lend a helping hand, and sprung toward the Texan.

"Put those steel wristlets upon this man!"

He obeyed quickly, and as they snapped the Mexican said:

"I'll submit, Chief Branch, and go to the Prophet as he orders."

"You are too late, sir, for you go as my prisoner."

Monte turned deadly pale now, but staggered to his feet and glanced toward Cleo, who said despairingly:

"I can do nothing, Monte."

"You have already done too much, Miss Amidon, for I have papers to arrest you for attempted murder and robbery in California, and a witness of the murder of Detective Harry Hawk, who was shadowing you when killed."

"You are my prisoner also, Miss Amidon, and other charges, let me add against you, are the kidnapping of Miss Hembold and being the ally of outlaws."

Cleo Amidon sunk down upon the bench near her cabin and seemed utterly crushed.

Then the Texan quickly slipped the steel manacles upon the wrists of the bogus preacher, who groaned in agony of spirit.

"Miss Hembold, permit me to congratulate you upon the prospect of soon being returned to your father."

"And all through you, sir," and the tears came into the beautiful eyes.

"There are many more of your friends not far away, Miss Hembold," and, placing a bugle to his lips, the Texan blew a long and winding blast, just as the outposts were seen coming in, along with the men sent after them by Brass, who now advanced and joined the party at headquarters, ahead of the outlaws who came straggling up to the spot.

The outlaws were nervous, for something had gone wrong, they knew.

He cast his eyes over the crowd.

"The Danites in that crowd will step out of line!" he ordered sternly.

Brass and four others obeyed.

Just then, at a gallop toward the spot, having heard the bugle-call, came Buckskin Sam, Colorado Carl, Poker and the two Indians.

The outlaws seemed about to fly, or to fire upon them, but the Texan called out:

"Hold! you men are in a trap; don't bring sudden death upon your heads!"

Then, as the party of horsemen halted and sprung from their saddles, he said:

"Colorado Carl, you, as a Danite, take charge of Monte, the Mexican, and those five men. You are also to take charge of this woman, and Bright Eyes and Panther Foot will go with you as a guard. Take them to the secret retreat where I will join you!"

"Yes, chief," and with alacrity Colorado Carl snapped the irons upon the prisoners, and the Indians, having led their horses up, made them mount.

He raised Cleo Amidon to her saddle, and put her baggage upon a pack-horse.

"Good-by, Cleo, and if it is any satisfaction to you, know that I forgive you," said Heloise, sadly.

But the woman made no reply, and Colorado Carl, placing himself by her side, rode away, followed by the prisoners, their horses leashed together with a lariat, and the two watchful and alert Indians bringing up the rear.

"Buckskin Sam, go to the scouts' retreat, and to Captain Taylor's camp, and bring them here to take possession."

"Yes, chief," and Buckskin Sam rode off at a run.

"Now, Poker, prepare a supper, and do your best at it," the chief said, with a smile, and he proceeded to keep the remaining prisoners under cover of his repeating-rifle, for he had made them lay down their fire-arms.

Half an hour after Buffalo Bill and his scouts, and Captain Taylor and his men, came dashing up to find the stronghold taken and their prisoners, nine in number, awaiting them.

"It saves powder and lead, my gallant friend, but it will take a great deal of hemp to hang them," said Captain Taylor.

"The hemp will not be wasted," remarked Surgeon Powell, while, after having greeted Heloise and congratulated Buffalo Bill, he returned to the Texan and asked:

"Now, tell me if I am right, will you?"

"What would you know, Cody?"

"Are you not the man we knew as Gentleman Jack at Hallelujah City?"

"Yes, I had my full beard then and wore a wig, so that you did not recognize me as the man you had known as Bandbox Bill, the Bravo in Broadcloth, and the Danite Detective."

"I knew that I could aid you best by remaining unknown, still a mystery, so I became as it were a man of many masks."

CHAPTER LX.

CONCLUSION.

It was a right royal capture, that of the Toll-Takers' stronghold, and the soldiers started for the fort loaded with plunder.

Heloise Hembold was placed under the especial escort of Lieutenant Emory Ames, whose delight at her escape fairly touched her heart, and it was a gala day in Fort Grand when the party returned with the rescued maiden, and it gave Major Hembold a new lease on life.

Gentleman Jack bade the party farewell at the stronghold, and he blushed like a boy when telling Heloise good-by at her words:

"I owe you more than life—kiss me good-by, and remember that the name of Mortimer Bainbridge will ever be remembered in my prayers."

He kissed her, and though all envied him, not even Emory Ames was jealous.

When he rode away in the gathering twilight, accompanied by Buckskin Sam and Lucas, alias Poker, he was given three rousing cheers.

Two months after Heloise Hembold received a letter from him that read:

"MY DEAR MISS HEMBOLD:—

Permit me to say that I carried Monte Miranda and the other prisoners to Salt Lake and delivered them up to the Danite League.

"The result was that they were put to death for their crimes, and I inclose the official notification of the death of Monte Miranda, and one was also sent by the authorities to Mexico, which leave to you the entire fortune he sought so to gain."

"Permit me to add that as 'Captain Branch, the Danite,' I then mysteriously disappeared from Mormon life, as did also Colorado Carl, and we retraced our steps toward the Lone Star State, being joined at Hallelujah City by Buckskin Sam and Poker, who went there to await our coming."

"Please say to Buffalo Bill and Surgeon Powell that I advised Lady Kate and Gambler Lou to give up the life they led, and they have gone East to dwell and promised to do much good with the riches they have saved in the border mining-camp."

"Kit, the Overland driver, was delighted to learn of your rescue, and says that he hopes to die on his stage-box some day doing his duty, but for fear of road-agents the Overland Company have given him two guards, who are none other than my Indian friends, Night-Eyes and Panther Foot."

"As for that unfortunate woman, Cleo Amidon, she remained in Salt Lake until the execution of Monte and then disappeared; but she was found several days after dead upon his grave, having taken her own life; so she proved the old adage that no matter what a man may become he will find some woman to love him."

"Now let me say that I am at my own home, Overlook Ranch, and the one whom you knew as The Woman in Black—whom I called my sister, but was my sister-in-law—is now my wife."

"She, too, has had an eventful life; but one who sought to wrong her, when seeking to find her, met death at the hands of Comanchas."

"The shadows of the past are lifting now, and though there will be ever dark memories to often cloud our lives, still we are happy, and hope to welcome you here some day."

"With my regards to my comrades of the trails and your good father, believe me,

"Ever your friend,

"GENTLEMAN JACK."

This letter was read to her immediate friends by Heloise, and gave universal pleasure, and she made up her mind to claim her fortune, which was rightfully her own, and she received it, too, I may add, and her husband, for she married handsome Lieutenant Ames, had to resign from the army to care for the large estate.

But her riches did not spoil Heloise, and she is ever glad to welcome to her elegant home, near New York City, any one of the gallant heroes of the Crimson Star, and many have wondered why the beautiful Mrs. Ames always wears about her neck a chain suspending a five-point star of rubies.

THE END.

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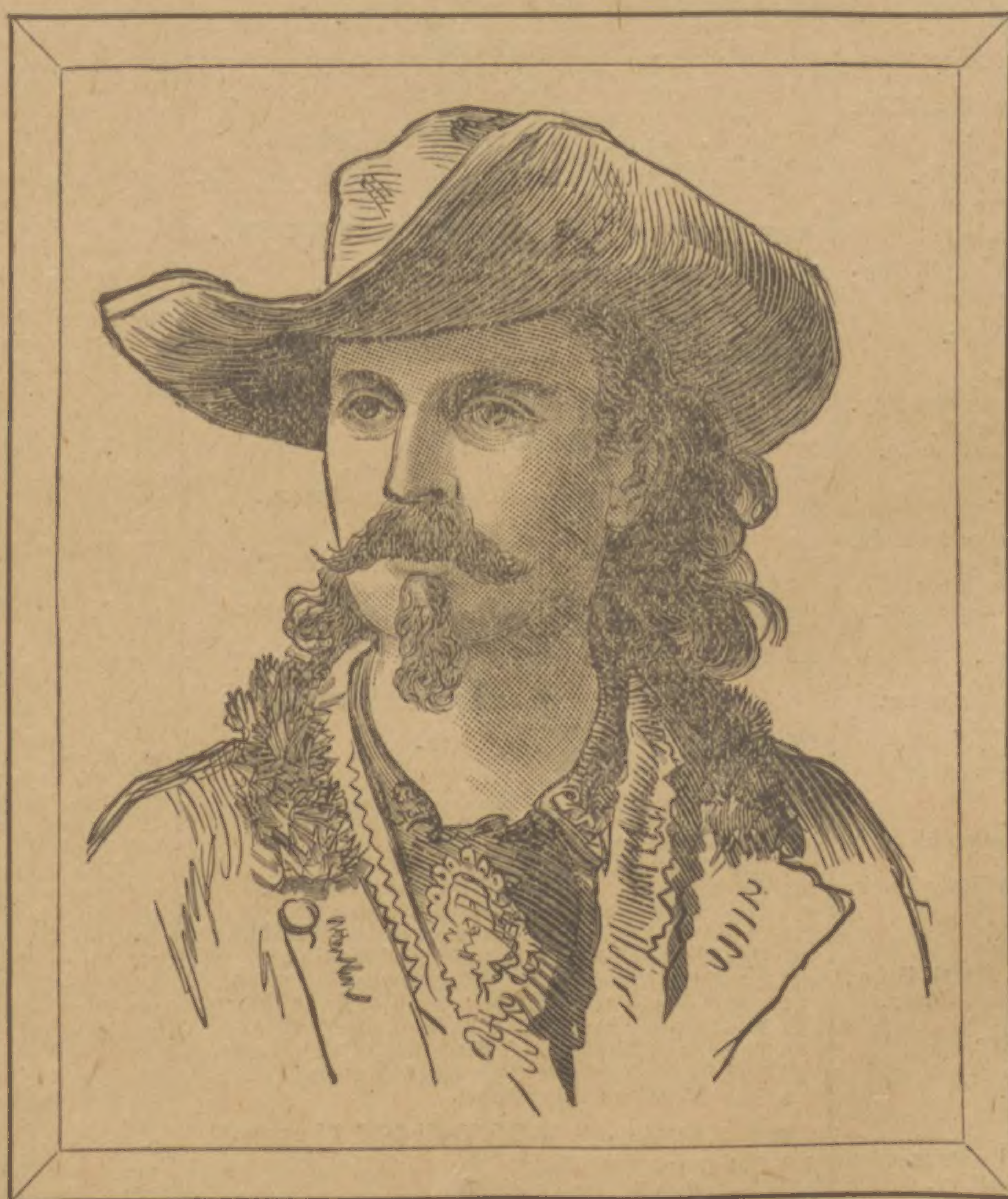
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